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A grim tale of a future in which everyone is desperate to escape reality, and a hero who wants to have his wine and drink it, too.

A BOTTLE OF Old Wine

By Richard O. Lewis

HERBERT HYREL settled himself more comfortably in his easy chair, extended his short legs further toward the fireplace, and let his eyes travel cautiously in the general direction of his wife.

She was in her chair as usual, her long legs curled up beneath her, the upper half of her face hidden in the bulk of her personalized, three-dimensional telovis. The telovis, of a stereoscopic nature, seemingly brought the performers with all their tinsel and color directly into the room of the watcher.

Hyrel had no way of seeing into the plastic affair she wore, but he guessed from the expression on the lower half of her face that she

was watching one of the newer black-market sex-operas. In any event, there would be no sound, movement, or sign of life from her for the next three hours. To break the thread of the play for even a moment would ruin all the previous emotional build-up.

There had been a time when he hated her for those long and silent evenings, lonely hours during which he was completely ignored. It was different now, however, for those hours furnished him with time for an escape of his own.

His lips curled into a tight smile and his right hand fondled the unobtrusive switch beneath his trouser leg. He did not press the switch. He would wait a few minutes longer. But it was comforting to know that it was there, exhilarating to know that he could escape for a few hours by a mere flick of his finger.

He let his eyes stray to the dim light of the artificial flames in the fireplace. His hate for her was not bounded merely by those lonely hours she had forced upon him. No, it was far more encompassing. He hated her with a deep, burning savagery that was deadly in its passion. He hated her for her money, the money she kept securely from him. He hated her for the paltry allowance she doled out to him, as if he were an irresponsible child. It was as if she were constantly reminding him in every glance and gesture, "I made a bad bargain when I married you. You wanted me, my money, everything, and had nothing to give in return except your own doltish self. You set a trap for me, baited with lies and a false front. Now you are caught in your own trap and will remain there like a mouse to eat from my hand whatever crumbs I stoop to give you."

But some day his hate would be appeased. Yes, some day soon he would kill her!

He shot a sideways glance at her, wondering if by chance she suspected.... She hadn't moved. Her lips were pouted into a half smile; the sex-opera had probably reached one of its more pleasurable moments.

Hyrel let his eyes shift back to the fireplace again. Yes, he would kill her. Then he would claim a rightful share of her money, be rid of her debasing dominance.

HE LET THE thought run around through his head, savoring it with mental taste buds. He would not kill her tonight. No, nor the next

night. He would wait, wait until he had sucked the last measure of pleasure from the thought.

It was like having a bottle of rare old wine on a shelf where it could be viewed daily. It was like being able to pause again and again before the bottle, hold it up to the light, and say to it, "Some day, when my desire for you has reached the ultimate, I shall unstopper you quietly and sip you slowly to the last soul-satisfying drop." As long as the bottle remained there upon the shelf it was symbolic of that pleasurable moment....

He snapped out of his reverie and realized he had been wasting precious moments. There would be time enough tomorrow for gloating. Tonight, there were other things to do. Pleasurable things. He remembered the girl he had met the night before, and smiled smugly. Perhaps she would be awaiting him even now. If not, there would be another one....

He settled himself deeper into the chair, glanced once more at his wife, then let his head lean comfortably back against the chair's headrest. His hand upon his thigh felt the thin mesh that cloaked his body beneath his clothing like a sheer stocking. His fingers went again to the tiny switch. Again he hesitated.

Herbert Hyrel knew no more about the telporter suit he wore than he did about the radio in the corner, the TV set against the wall, or the personalized telovis his wife was wearing. You pressed one of the buttons on the radio; music came out. You pressed a button and clicked a dial on the TV; music and pictures came out. You pressed a button and made an adjustment on the telovis; three-dimensional, emotion-colored pictures leaped into the room. You pressed a tiny switch on the telporter suit; you were whisked away to a receiving set you had previously set up in secret.

He knew that the music and the images of the performers on the TV and telovis were brought to his room by some form of electrical impulse or wave while the actual musicians and performers remained in the studio. He knew that when he pressed the switch on his thigh something within him—his ectoplasm, higher self, the thing spirits use for materialization, whatever its real name—streamed out of him along an invisible channel, leaving his body behind in the chair in a conscious but dream-like state. His other self materialized in a small cabin in a hidden nook between a highway and a river where he had

installed the receiving set a month ago.

He thought once more of the girl who might be waiting for him, smiled, and pressed the switch.

THE DANK AIR of the cabin was chill to Herbert Hyrel's naked flesh. He fumbled through the darkness for the clothing he kept there, found his shorts and trousers, got hurriedly into them, then flicked on a pocket lighter and ignited a stub of candle upon the table. By the wavering light, he finished dressing in the black satin clothing, the white shirt, the flowing necktie and tam. He invoiced the contents of his billfold. Not much. And his monthly pittance was still two weeks away....

He had skimped for six months to salvage enough money from his allowance to make a down payment on the telporter suit. Since then, his expenses—monthly payments for the suit, cabin rent, costly liquor—had forced him to place his nights of escape on strict ration. He could not go on this way, he realized. Not now. Not since he had met the girl. He had to have more money. Perhaps he could not afford the luxury of leaving the wine bottle longer upon the shelf....

Riverside Club, where Hyrel arrived by bus and a hundred yards of walking, was exclusive. It catered to a clientele that had but three things in common: money, a desire for utter self-abandonment, and a sales slip indicating ownership of a telporter suit. The club was of necessity expensive, for self-telportation was strictly illegal, and police protection came high.

Herbert Hyrel adjusted his white, silken mask carefully at the door and shoved his sales slip through a small aperture where it was thoroughly scanned by unseen eyes. A buzzer sounded an instant later, the lock on the door clicked, and Hyrel pushed through into the exhilarating warmth of music and laughter.

The main room was large. Hidden lights along the walls sent slow beams of red, blue, vermillion, green, yellow and pink trailing across the domed ceiling in a heterogeneous pattern. The colored beams mingled, diffused, spread, were caught up by mirrors of various tints which diffused and mingled the lights once more until the whole effect was an ever-changing panorama of softly-melting shades.

The gay and bizarre costumes of the masked revelers on the dance floor and at the tables, unearthly in themselves, were made even

more so by the altering light. Music flooded the room from unseen sources. Laughter—hysterical, drunken, filled with utter abandonment—came from the dance floor, the tables, and the private booths and rooms hidden cleverly within the walls.

Hyrel pushed himself to an unoccupied table, sat down and ordered a bottle of cheap whiskey. He would have preferred champagne, but his depleted finances forbade the more discriminate taste.

When his order arrived, he poured a glass tumbler half full and consumed it eagerly while his eyes scanned the room in search of the girl. He couldn't see her in the dim swirl of color. Had she arrived?

Perhaps she was wearing a different costume than she had the night before. If so, recognition might prove difficult.

He poured himself another drink, promising himself he would go in search of her when the liquor began to take effect.

A woman clad in the revealing garb of a Persian dancer threw an arm about him from behind and kissed him on the cheek through the veil which covered the lower part of her face.

"Hi, honey," she giggled into his ear. "Havin' a time?"

He reached for the white arm to pull her to him, but she eluded his grasp and reeled away into the waiting arms of a tall toreador. Hyrel gulped his whiskey and watched her nestle into the arms of her partner and begin with him a sinuous, suggestive dance. The whiskey had begun its warming effect, and he laughed.

This was the land of the lotus eaters, the sanctuary of the escapists, the haven of all who wished to cast off their shell of inhibition and become the thing they dreamed themselves to be. Here one could be among his own kind, an actor upon a gay stage, a gaudy butterfly metamorphosed from the slug, a knight of old.

The Persian dancing girl was probably the wife of a boorish oaf whose idea of romance was spending an evening telling his wife how he came to be a successful bank president. But she had found her means of escape. Perhaps she had pleaded a sick headache and had retired to her room. And there upon the bed now reposed her shell of reality while her inner self, the shadowy one, completely materialized, became an exotic thing from the East in this never-never land.

The man, the toreador, had probably closeted himself within his library with a set of account books and had left strict orders not to be disturbed until he had finished with them.

Both would have terrific hangovers in the morning. But that, of course, would be fully compensated for by the memories of the evening. Hyrel chuckled. The situation struck him as being funny: the shadowy self got drunk and had a good time, and the outer husk suffered the hangover in the morning. Strange. Strange how a device such as the telporter suit could cause the shadow of each bodily cell to leave the body, materialize, and become a reality in its own right. And yet ...

HE LOOKED at the heel of his left hand. There was a long, irregular scar there. It was the result of a cut he had received nearly three weeks ago when he had fallen over this very table and had rammed his hand into a sliver of broken champagne glass. Later that evening, upon re-telporting back home, the pain of the cut had remained in his hand, but there was no sign of the cut itself on the hand of his outer self. The scar was peculiar to the shadowy body only. There was something about the shadowy body that carried the hurts to the outer body, but not the scars....

Sudden laughter broke out near him, and he turned quickly in that direction. A group of gaily costumed revelers was standing in a semi-circle about a small mound of clothing upon the floor. It was the costume of the toreador.

Hyrel laughed, too. It had happened many times before—a costume suddenly left empty as its owner, due to a threat of discovery at home, had had to press the switch in haste to bring his shadowy self—and complete consciousness—back to his outer self in a hurry.

A waiter picked up the clothing. He would put it safely away so that the owner could claim it upon his next visit to the club. Another waiter placed a fresh bottle of whiskey on the table before Hyrel, and Hyrel paid him for it.

The whiskey, reaching his head now in surges of warm cheerfulness, was filling him with abandonment, courage, and a desire for merriment. He pushed himself up from the table, joined the merry throng, threw his arm about the Persian dancer, drew her close. They began dancing slowly to the throbbing rhythm, dancing and holding on to each other tightly. Hyrel could feel her hot breath through her veil upon his neck, adding to the headiness of the liquor. His feeling of depression and inferiority flowed suddenly from him. Once again he was the all-conquering male.

His arm trembled as it drew her still closer to him and he began dancing directly and purposefully toward the shadows of a clump of artificial palms near one corner of the room. There was an exit to the garden behind the palms.

Half way there they passed a secluded booth from which protruded a long leg clad in black mesh stocking. Hyrel paused as he recognized that part of the costume. It was she! The girl! The one he had met so briefly the night before!

His arm slid away from the Persian dancer, took hold of the mesh-clad leg, and pulled. A female form followed the leg from the booth and fell into his arms. He held her tightly, kissed her white neck, let her perfume send his thoughts reeling.

"Been looking for me, honey?" she whispered, her voice deep and throaty.

"You know it!"

He began whisking her away toward the palms. The Persian girl was pulled into the booth.

Yes, she was wearing the same costume she had worn the night before, that of a can-can dancer of the 90's. The mesh hose that encased her shapely legs were held up by flowered supporters in such a manner as to leave four inches of white leg exposed between hose top and lacy panties. Her skirt, frilled to suggest innumerable petticoats, fell away at each hip, leaving the front open to expose the full length of legs. She wore a wig of platinum hair encrusted with jewels that sparkled in the lights. Her jewel-studded mask was as white as her hair and covered the upper half of her face, except for the large almond slits for her eyes. A white purse, jewel crusted, dangled from one arm.

He stopped once before reaching the palms, drew her closer, kissed her long and ardently. Then he began pulling her on again.

She drew back when they reached the shelter of the fronds.

"Champagne, first," she whispered huskily into his ear.

His heart sank. He had very little money left. Well, it might buy a cheap brand....

SHE SIPPED her champagne slowly and provocatively across the table from him. Her eyes sparkled behind the almond slits of her mask, caught the color changes and cast them back. She was

wearing contact lenses of a garish green.

He wished she would hurry with her drink. He had horrible visions of his wife at home taking off her telovis and coming to his chair. He would then have to press the switch that would jerk his shadowy self back along its invisible connecting cord, jerk him back and leave but a small mound of clothes upon the chair at the table.

Deep depression laid hold of him. He would not be able to see her after tonight until he received his monthly dole two weeks hence. She wouldn't wait that long. Someone else would have her.

Unless ...

Yes, he knew now that he was going to kill his wife as soon as the opportunity presented itself. It would be a simple matter. With the aid of the telporter suit, he could establish an iron-clad alibi.

He took a long drink of whiskey and looked at the dancers about him. Sight of their gay costumes heightened his depression. He was wearing a cheap suit of satin, all he could afford. But some day soon he would show them! Some time soon he would be dressed as gaily....

"Something troubling you, honey?"

His gaze shot back to her and she blurred slightly before his eyes.

"No. Nothing at all!" He summoned a sickly smile and clutched her hand in his. "Come on. Let's dance."

He drew her from the chair and into his arms. She melted toward him as if desiring to become a part of him. A tremor of excitement surged through him and threatened to turn his knees into quivering jelly. He could not make his feet conform to the flooding rhythm of the music. He half stumbled, half pushed her along past the booths.

In the shelter of the palms he drew her savagely to him. "Let's—let's go outside." His voice was little more than a croak.

"But, honey!" She pushed herself away, her low voice maddening him.

"Don't you have a private room? A girl doesn't like to be taken outside...."

Her words bit into his brain like the blade of a hot knife.

No, he didn't have a private room at the club like the others. A private room for his telporter receiver, a private room where he could take a willing guest. No! He couldn't afford it! No! No! NO! His lot was a cheap suit of satin! Cheap whiskey! Cheap champagne! A cheap shack by the river....

An inarticulate cry escaped his twisted lips. He clutched her roughly to

him and dragged her through the door and into the moonlight, whiskey and anger lending him brutal strength.

He pulled her through the deserted garden. All the others had private rooms! He pulled her to the far end, behind a clump of squatty firs. His hands clawed at her. He tried to smother her mouth with kisses.

She eluded him deftly. "But, honey!" Her voice had gone deeper into her throat. "I just want to be sure about things. If you can't afford one of the private rooms—if you can't afford to show me a good time—if you can't come here real often ..."

The whiskey pounded and throbbed at his brain like blows from an unseen club. His ego curled and twisted within him like a headless serpent.

"I'll have money!" he shouted, struggling to hold her. "I'll have plenty of money! After tonight!"

"Then we'll wait," she said. "We'll wait until tomorrow night."

"No!" he screamed. "You don't believe me! You're like the others! You think I'm no good! But I'll show you! I'll show all of you!"

SHE HAD GONE coldly rigid in his arms, unyielding.

Madness added to the pounding in his brain. Tears welled into his eyes.

"I'll show you! I'll kill her! Then I'll have money!" The hands clutching her shoulders shook her drunkenly. "You wait here! I'll go home and kill her now! Then I'll be back!"

"Silly boy!" Her low laughter rang hollowly in his ears. "And just who is it you are going to kill?"

"My wife!" he cried. "My wife! I'll ..."

A sudden sobering thought struck him. He was talking too much. And he wasn't making sense. He shouldn't be telling her this. Anyway, he couldn't get the money tonight even if he did kill his wife.

"And so you are going to kill your wife...."

He blinked the tears from his eyes. His chest was heaving, his heart pounding. He looked at her shimmering form. "Y-yes," he whispered. Her eyes glinted strangely in the light of the moon. Her handbag glinted as she opened it, and something she took from it glittered coldly in her hand.

"Fool!"

The first shot tore squarely through his heart. And while he stood

staring at her, mouth agape, a second shot burned its way through his bewildered brain.

MRS. HERBERT HYREL removed the telovis from her head and laid it carefully aside. She uncoiled her long legs from beneath her, walked to her husband's chair, and stood for a long moment looking down at him, her lips drawn back in contempt. Then she bent over him and reached down his thigh until her fingers contacted the small switch. Seconds later, a slight tremor shook Hyrel's body. His eyes snapped open, air escaped his lungs, his lower jaw sagged inanely, and his head lolled to one side.

She stood a moment longer, watching his eyes become glazed and sightless. Then she walked to the telephone.

"Police?" she said. "This is Mrs. Herbert Hyrel. Something horrible has happened to my husband. Please come over immediately. Bring a doctor."

She hung up, went to her bathroom, stripped off her clothing, and slid carefully out of her telporter suit. This she folded neatly and tucked away into the false back of the medicine cabinet. She found a fresh pair of blue, plastifur pajamas and got into them.

She was just arriving back into the living room, tying the cord of her dressing gown about her slim waist, when she heard the sound of the police siren out front.

THE END

Transcriber's Note:

This etext was produced from If Worlds of Science Fiction July 1953. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.

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CONFIDENCE GAME

*Cutter demanded more and more and more efficiency—and got it!
But, as in anything, enough is enough, and too much is ...*

By JAMES McKIMMEY, JR.

GEORGE H. CUTTER wheeled his big convertible into his reserved space in the Company parking lot with a flourish. A bright California sun drove its early brightness down on him as he strode toward the square, four-story brick building which said Cutter Products, Inc. over its front door. A two-ton truck was grinding backward, toward the loading doors, the thick-shouldered driver craning his neck. Cutter moved briskly forward, a thick-shouldered man himself, though not very tall. A glint of light appeared in his eyes, as he saw Kurt, the truck driver, fitting the truck's rear end into the tight opening.

"Get that junk out of the way!" he yelled, and his voice roared over the

noise of the truck's engine.

Kurt snapped his head around, his blue eyes thinning, then recognition spread humor crinkles around his eyes and mouth. "All right, sir," he said. "Just a second while I jump out, and I'll lift it out of your way."

"With bare hands?" Cutter said.

"With bare hands," Kurt said.

Cutter's laugh boomed, and as he rounded the front of the truck, he struck the right front fender with his fist. Kurt roared back from the cab with his own laughter.

He liked joking harshly with Kurt and with the rest of the truck drivers. They were simple, and they didn't have his mental strength. But they had another kind of strength. They had muscle and energy, and most important, they had guts. Twenty years before Cutter had driven a truck himself. The drivers knew that, and there was a bond between them, the drivers and himself, that seldom existed between employer and employee.

The guard at the door came to a reflex attention, and Cutter bobbed his head curtly. Then, instead of taking the stairway that led up the front to the second floor and his office, he strode down the hallway to the left, angling through the shop on the first floor. He always walked through the shop. He liked the heavy driving sound of the machines in his ears, and the muscled look of the men, in their coarse work shirts and heavy-soled shoes. Here again was strength, in the machines and in the men.

And here again too, the bond between Cutter and his employees was a thing as real as the whirl and grind and thump of the machines, as real as the spray of metal dust, spitting away from a spinning saw blade. He was able to drive himself through to them, through the hard wall of unions and prejudices against business suits and white collars and soft clean hands, 38because they knew that at one time he had also been a machinist and then tool and die operator and then a shop foreman. He got through to them, and they respected him. They were even inspired by him, Cutter knew, by his energy and alertness and steel confidence. It was one good reason why their production continually skimmed along near the top level of efficiency.

Cutter turned abruptly and started up the metal-lipped concrete steps to the second floor. He went up quickly, his square, almost chunky

figure moving smoothly, and there was not the faintest shortening in his breath when he reached the level of his own office.

Coming up the back steps required him to cross the entire administration office which contained the combined personnel of Production Control, Procurement, and Purchasing. And here, the sharp edge of elation, whetted by the walk past the loading dock and the truck drivers and the machine shop and the machinists, was dulled slightly.

On either side of him as he paced rapidly across the room, were the rows of light-oak desks which contained the kind of men he did not like: fragile men, whether thin or fat, fragile just the same, in the eyes and mouth, and pale with their fragility. They affected steel postures behind those desks, but Cutter knew that the steel was synthetic, that there was nothing in that mimicked look of alertness and virility but posing. They were a breed he did not understand, because he had never been a part of them, and so this time, the invisible but very real quality of employer-employee relationship turned coldly brittle, like frozen cellophane.

The sounds now, the clicking of typewriters, the sliding of file drawers, the squeak of adjusted swivel chairs—all of it—irritated him, rather than giving him inspiration, and so he hurried his way, especially when he passed that one fellow with the sad, frightened eyes, who touched his slim hands at the papers on his desk, like a cautious fawn testing the soundness of the earth in front of him. What was his name? Linden? God, Cutter thought, the epitome of the breed, this man: sallow and slow and so hesitant that he appeared to be about to leap from his chair at the slightest alarm.

Cutter broke his aloofness long enough to glare at the man, and Linden turned his frightened eyes quickly to his desk and began shuffling his papers nervously. Some day, Cutter promised himself, he was going to stop in front of the man and shout, “Booo!” and scare the poor devil to hell and back.

He pushed the glass doors that led to his own offices, and moving into Lucile's ante-room restored his humor. Lucile, matronly yet quick and youthfully spirited, smiled at him and met his eyes directly. Here was some strength again, and he felt the full energy of his early-morning drive returning fully. Lucile, behind her desk in this plain but expensive reception room, reminded him of fast, hard efficiency, the quality of

accomplishment that he had dedicated himself to.

"Goddamned sweet morning, eh, 39Lucy?" he called.

"Beautiful, George," she said. She had called him by his first name for years. He didn't mind, from her. Not many could do it, but those who could, successfully, he respected.

"What's up first?" he asked, and she followed him into his own office. It was a high-ceilinged room, with walls bare except for a picture of Alexander Hamilton on one wall, and an award plaque from the State Chamber of Commerce on the opposite side of the room. He spun his leather-cushioned swivel chair toward him and sat down and placed his thick hands against the surface of the desk. Lucile took the only other chair in the office, to the side of the desk, and flipped open her appointment pad.

"Quay wants to see you right away. Says it's important."

Cutter nodded slightly and closed his eyes. Lucile went on, calling his appointments for the day with clicking precision. He stored the information, leaning back in his chair, adjusting his mind to each, so that there would be no energy wasted during the hard, swift day.

"That's it," Lucile said. "Do you want to see Quay?"

"Send him in," Cutter said, and he was already leaning into his desk, signing his name to the first of a dozen letters which he had dictated into the machine during the last ten minutes of the preceding day.

Lucile disappeared, and three minutes later Robert Quay took her place in the chair beside Cutter's desk. He was a taller man than Cutter, and thinner. Still, there was an athletic grace about him, a sureness of step and facial expression, that made it obvious that he was physically fit. He was single and only thirty-five, twelve years younger than Cutter, but he had been with Cutter Products, Inc. for thirteen years. In college he had been a Phi Beta Kappa and lettered three years on the varsity as a quarterback. He was the kind of rare combination that Cutter liked, and Cutter had offered him more than the Chicago Cardinals to get him at graduation.

Cutter felt Quay's presence, without looking up at him. "Goddamned sweet morning, eh, Bob?"

"It really is, George," Quay said.

"What's up?" Cutter stopped signing, having finished the entire job, and he stared directly into Quay's eyes. Quay met the stare unflinchingly.

"I've got a report from Sid Perry at Adacam Research."

"Your under-cover agent again, eh?"

Quay grinned. Adacam Research conducted industrial experimentation which included government work. The only way to find out what really went on there, Cutter had found out, was to find a key man who didn't mind talking for a certain amount of compensation, regardless of sworn oaths and signatures to government statements. You could always get somebody, Cutter knew, and Quay had been able to get a young chemist, Sidney Perry. "Okay," Cutter said. "What are they doing over there?"

"There's a fellow who's offered Adacam his project for testing. They're highly interested, but they're not going to handle it."

40 "Why not?"

Quay shrugged. "Too touchy. It's a device that's based on electronics —"

"What the hell is touchy about electronics?"

"This deals with the human personality," Quay said, as though that were explanation enough.

Cutter understood. He snorted. "Christ, anything that deals with the human personality scares them over there, doesn't it?"

Quay spread his hands.

"All right," Cutter said. "What's this device supposed to do?"

"The theory behind it is to produce energy units which reach a plane of intensity great enough to affect the function of the human ego."

"Will it?" Cutter never wasted time on surprise or curiosity or theory. His mind acted directly. Would it or wouldn't it? Performance versus non-performance. Efficiency versus inefficiency. Would it improve production of Cutter Products, Inc., or would it not?

"Sid swears they're convinced it will. The factors, on paper, check out. But there's been no experimentation, because it involves the human personality. This thing, when used, is supposed to perform a definite personality change on the individual subjected."

"How?"

"You know the theory of psychiatric therapy—the theory of shock treatment. The effect is some what similar, but a thousand times more effective."

"What is the effect?"

"A gradual dissolving of inferiority influences, or inhibitions, from the

personality. A clear mind resulting. A healthy ego.”

“And?”

“Confidence.”

Cutter stared at Quay's eyes, assimilating the information. “That's all very damned nice. Now where does it fit in with Cutter Products?”

Quay drew a notebook from his coat pocket swiftly. “You remember that efficiency check we had made two months ago—the rating of individual departments on comparable work produced?”

Cutter nodded.

Quay looked at his notebook. “All administrative personnel departments showed an average of—”

“Thirty-six point eight less efficiency than the skilled and unskilled labor departments,” Cutter finished.

Quay smiled slightly. He snapped the notebook shut. “Right. So that's our personnel efficiency bug.”

“Christ, I've known that for twenty years,” Cutter snapped.

“Okay,” Quay said quickly, alerting himself back to the serious effort.

“Now then, you'll remember we submitted this efficiency report to Babcock and Steele for analysis, and their report offered no answer, because their experience showed that you always get that kind of ratio, because of personality differences. The administrative personnel show more inferiority influences per man, thus less confidence, thus less efficiency.”

“I remember all that,” Cutter said.

“Their report also pointed out that this inevitable loss of efficiency is leveled out, by proportionately smaller wage compensation. The administrative personnel gets approximately twenty-five percent less compensation than the skilled labor personnel, and the remaining eleven point eight percent loss of efficiency is made up by the more highly efficient unskilled labor receiving approximately the same compensation as the administrative personnel.”

“I remember all that nonsense, too,” Cutter reddened faintly with a sudden anger. He did not believe the statistics were nonsense, only that you should expect to write off a thirty-six point eight efficiency loss on the basis of adjusted compensation. A thirty-six point eight efficiency loss was a comparable loss in profits. You never compensated a loss in profits, except by erasing that loss. “And so this is supposed to fix it?”

Quay's head bobbed. "It's worth a try, it seems to me. I've talked to Sid about it extensively, and he tells me that Bolen, who's developed this thing, would be willing to install enough units to cover the entire administrative force, from the department-head level down."

"How?"

Quay motioned a hand. "It's no larger than a slightly thick saucer. It could be put inside the chairs." Quay smiled faintly. "They sit on it, you see, and—"

Cutter was not amused. "How much?"

"Nothing," Quay said quickly. "Absolutely nothing. Bolen wants actual tests badly, and the Institute wouldn't do it. Snap your fingers, and give him a hundred and fifty people to work on, and it's yours to use for nothing. He'll do the installing, and he wants to keep it secret. It's essential, he says, to get an accurate reaction from the subjects affected. For him it's perfect, because we're running a continuous efficiency check, and if this thing does the job like it's supposed to do it, we'll have gained the entire benefits for nothing. How can we lose?" Cutter stared at Quay for a moment, his mind working swiftly. "Call Horner in on this, but nobody else. Absolutely nobody else. Tell Horner to write up a contract for this fellow to sign. Get a clause in there to the effect that this fellow, Bolen, assumes all responsibility for any effects not designated in the defining part of the contract. Fix it up so that he's entirely liable, then get it signed, and let's see what happens."

Quay smiled fully and stood up. "Right, sir." He had done a good job, he knew. This was the sort of thing that would keep him solidly entrenched in Cutter's favor. "Right, George," he said, remembering that he didn't need to call Cutter sir anymore, but he knew he wouldn't hear any more from Cutter, because Cutter was already looking over a blueprint, eyes thin and careful, mind completely adjusted to a new problem.

EDWARD BOLEN called the saucer-sized disk, the Confidet. He was a thin, short, smiling man with fine brown hair which looked as though it had just been ruffled by a high wind, and he moved, Cutter noticed, with quick, but certain motions. The installing was done two nights after Cutter's lawyer, Horner, had written up the contract and gotten it signed by Bolen. Only Quay, Bolen, and Cutter were present. Bolen fitted the disks into the base of the plastic chair cushions, and

he explained, as he inserted one, then another:

"The energy is inside each one, you see. The life of it is indefinite, and the amount of energy used is proportionate to the demand created."

"What the hell do you mean by energy?" Cutter demanded, watching the small man work.

Bolen laughed contentedly, and Quay flushed with embarrassment over anyone laughing at a question out of Cutter's lips. But Cutter did not react, only looked at Bolen, as though he could see somehow, beneath that smallness and quietness, a certain strength. Quay had seen that look on Cutter's face before, and it meant simply that Cutter would wait, analyzing expertly in the meantime, until he found his advantage. Quay wondered, if this gadget worked, how long Bolen would own the rights to it.

Cutter drove the Cadillac into Hallery Boulevard, as though the automobile were an English Austin, and just beyond the boundaries of the city, cut off into the hills, sliding into the night and the relative darkness of the exclusive, sparsely populated Green Oaks section. Ten minutes later, his house, a massive stone structure which looked as though it had been shifted intact from the center of some medieval moat, loomed up, gray and stony, and Capra, his handyman, took over the car and drove it into the garage, while Cutter strode up the wide steps to the door.

Niels took his hat, and Mary was waiting for him in the library. She was a rather large woman, although not fat, and when she wore high heels—which she was not prone to do, because although Cutter would not have cared, she kept trying to project into other people's minds and trying, as she said, "Not to do anything to them, that I wouldn't want them to do to me."—she rose a good inch above Cutter. She was pleasant humored, and cooperative, and the one great irritant about her that annoyed Cutter, was the fact that she was not capable of meeting life wholeheartedly and with strength.

She steadily worried about other people's feelings and thoughts, so that Cutter wondered if she were capable of the slightest personal conviction. Yet that weakness was an advantage at the same time, to him, because she worked constantly toward making him happy. The house was run to his minutest liking, and the servants liked her, so that while she did not use a strong enough hand, they somehow got things done for her, and Cutter had no real complaint. Someday, he

knew, he would be able to develop her into the full potential he knew she was capable of achieving, and then there wouldn't be even that one annoyance about her.

He sat down in the large, worn, leather chair, and she handed him a Scotch and water, and kissed his cheek, and then sat down opposite him in a smaller striped-satin chair.

"Did you have a nice day, dear?" she asked.

She was always pleasant and she always smiled at him, and she was indeed a handsome woman. They had been married but five years, and she was almost fifteen years younger than he, but they had a solid understanding. She respected his work, and she was careful with the money he allowed her, and she never forgot the Scotch and water. "The day was all right," he said.

"My goodness," she said, "you worked late. Do you want dinner right away?"

"I had some sandwiches at the office," he said, drinking slowly.

"That isn't enough," she said reproachfully, and he enjoyed her concern over him. "You'd better have some nice roast beef that Andre did just perfectly. And there's some wonderful dressing that I made myself, for just a small salad."

He smiled finally. "All right," he said. "All right."

She got up and kissed him again, and he relaxed in the large chair, sipping contentedly at his drink, listening to her footsteps hurrying away, the sound another indication that she was doing something for him. He felt tired and easy. He let his mind relax with his body. The gadget, the Confidet; that was going to work, he knew. It would erase the last important bug in his operational efficiency, and then he might even expand, the way he had wanted to all along. He closed his eyes for a moment, tasting of his contentment, and then he heard the sound of his dinner being placed on the dining room table, and he stood up briskly and walked out of the library. He really was hungry, he realized. Not only hungry but, he thought, he might make love to Mary that evening.

THE FIRST indication that the Confidet might be working, came three weeks later, when Quay handed Cutter the report showing an efficiency increase of 3.7 percent. "I think that should tell the story," Quay said elatedly.

"Doesn't mean anything," Cutter said. "Could be a thousand other

factors besides that damned gimmick.”

“But we’ve never been able to show more than one point five variance on the administrative checks.”

“The trouble with you, Quay,” Cutter said brusquely, “is you keep looking for miracles. You think the way to get things in this world is to hope real hard. Nothing comes easy, and I’ve got half a notion to get those damned silly things jerked out.” He bent over his work, obviously finished with Quay, and Quay, deflated, paced out of the office.

Cutter smiled inside the empty office. He liked to see Quay’s enthusiasm broken now and then. It took that, to mold a really good man, because that way he assumed real strength after a while. If he got knocked down and got up enough, he didn’t fall apart when he hit a really tough obstacle. Cutter was not unhappy about the efficiency figures at all, and he knew as well as Quay that they were decisive. Give it another two weeks, he thought, and if the increase was comparable, then they might have a real improvement on their hands. Those limp, jumpy creatures on the desks out there might actually start earning their keep. He was thinking about that, what it would mean to 44the total profit, when Lucile opened his door and he caught a glimpse of the office outside, including the clerk with the sad, frightened eyes. Even you, Linden, Cutter thought, we might even improve you.

The increase was comparable after another two weeks. In fact, the efficiency figure jumped to 8.9. Quay was too excited to be knocked down this time, and Cutter was unable to suppress his own pleasure. “This is really it this time, George,” Quay said. “It really is. And here.” He handed Cutter a set of figures. “Here’s what accounting estimates the profit to be on this eight-nine figure.”

Cutter nodded, his eyes thinning the slightest bit. “We won’t see that for a while.”

“No,” Quay said, “but we’ll see it! We’ll sure as hell see it! And if it goes much higher, we’ll absolutely balance out!”

“What does Bolen figure the top to be?”

“Ten percent.”

“Why not thirty-six point eight?” Cutter said, his eyes bright and narrow.

Quay whistled. “Even at ten, at the wage we’re paying—”

"Never settle for quarters or thirds," Cutter said. "Get the whole thing. Send for Bolen. I want to talk to him. And in the meantime, Bob, this is such a goddamned sweet morning, what do you say we go to lunch early?"

Quay blinked only once, which proved his adaptability. Cutter had just asked him to lunch, as though it were their habit to lunch together regularly, when in reality, Quay had never once gone to lunch with Cutter before. Quay was quite nonchalant, however, and he said, "Why, fine, George. I think that's a good idea."

BOLEN appeared in Cutter's office the next morning, smiling, his eyes darting quickly about Cutter's desk and walls, so that Cutter felt, for a moment, that showing Bolen anything as personal as his office, was a little like letting the man look into his brain.

"Quay tells me you've set ten percent as the top efficiency increase we can count on, Bolen." Cutter said it directly, to the point.

Bolen smiled, examining Cutter's hands and suit and eyes. "That's right, Mr. Cutter."

"Why?"

Bolen placed his small hands on his lap, looked at the tapered fingers, then up again at Cutter. He kept smiling. "It's a matter of saturation."

"How in hell could ten percent more efficiency turn into saturation?"

"Not ten percent more efficiency," Bolen said quietly. "Ten percent effect on the individual who creates the efficiency. Ten percent effect of that which causes him to be ten percent more efficient."

Cutter snorted. "Whatever the hell that damned gimmick does, it creates confidence, drive, strength, doesn't it? Isn't that what you said?"

"Yes," Bolen said politely. "Approximately."

"Can you explain to me then, how ten percent more confidence in a man is saturation?"

45Bolen studied what he was going to say carefully, smiling all the while. "Some men," he said very slowly, "are different than others, Mr. Cutter. Some men will react to personality changes as abrupt as this in different ways than others. You aren't too concerned, are you, with what those changes might already have done to any of the individuals affected?"

"Hell, no," Cutter said loudly. "Why should I be? All I'm interested in is efficiency. Tell me about efficiency, and I'll know what you're talking

about."

"All right," Bolen said. "We have no way of knowing right now which men have been affected more than others. All we have is an average. The average right now is eight and nine-tenths percent. But perhaps you have some workers who do not react, because they really do not suffer the lacks or compulsions or inhibitions that the Confidet is concerned with. Perhaps they are working at top efficiency right now, and no amount of further subjection to the Confidet will change them."

"All right then," Cutter said quickly, "we'll ferret that kind of deadwood out, and replace them!"

"How will you know which are deadwood?" Bolen asked pleasantly.

"Individual checks, of course!"

Bolen shook his head, looking back at his tapering fingers. "It won't necessarily work. You see, the work that these men are concerned with is not particularly demanding work, is it? And that means you want to strike a balance between capability and demand. It's the unbalance of these things that creates trouble, and in your case, the demand outweighed the capability. Now, if you get a total ten-percent increase, then you're balanced. If you go over that, you'll break the balance all over again, except that you'll have, in certain cases, capability outweighing the demand of the work."

"Good," Cutter said. "Any man whose capability outweighs the work he's doing will simply keep increasing his efficiency."

Bolen shook his head. "No. He'll react quite the other way. He'll lose interest, because the work will no longer be a challenge, and then the efficiency will drop."

Cutter's jaw hardened. "All right then. I'll move that man up, and fill his place with someone else."

Bolen looked at Cutter's eyes, examined them curiously. "Some men have a great deal of latent talent, Mr. Cutter. This talent released—"

Cutter frowned, studying Bolen carefully. Then he laughed suddenly.

"You think I might not be able to handle it?"

"Well, let's say that you've got a stable of gentle, quiet mares, and you turn them suddenly into thoroughbreds. You have to make allowances for that, Mr. Cutter. The same stalls, the same railings, the same stable boys might not be able to do the job anymore."

"Yes," Cutter said, smiling without humor, "but the owner has nothing to do with stalls and railings and stable boys, only in the sense that

they are subsidiary. The owner is the owner, and if he has to make a few subsidiary changes, all right. But nothing really affects the owner, no matter whether you've got gentle mares or 46 thoroughbreds."

Bolen nodded, as though he had expected that exact answer. "You are a very certain man, aren't you, Mr. Cutter?"

"Would I be here, in this office, heading this company, if I weren't, Bolen?"

Bolen smiled.

Cutter straightened in his chair. "All right, do we go on? Do we shoot for the limit?"

Bolen chose his words carefully. "I am interested in testing my Confidet, Mr. Cutter. This is the most important thing in the world to me. I don't recommend what you want to do. But, as long as you'll give me accurate reports on the effects of the Confidet, I'll go along with you. Providing you grant me one concession."

Cutter frowned.

"I want our written contract dissolved."

Cutter reddened faintly. Nobody ever demanded anything of him and got it easily, but his mind turned over rapidly, judging the increase in efficiency, the increase in profits. He would not necessarily have to stop with administrative personnel. There were other departments, too, that could stand a little sharpening. Finally he nodded, reluctantly. "All right, Bolen."

Bolen smiled and left quickly, and Cutter stared at his desk for a moment, tense. Then, he relaxed and the hard sternness of his face softened a bit. He put his finger on his desk calendar, and looked at a date Lucile had circled for him. He grinned, and picked up the telephone, and dialed.

"This is George H. Cutter," he said to the man who answered. "My wife's birthday is next Saturday. Do you remember that antique desk I bought her last year? Good. Well, the truth is, she uses it all the time, so this year I'd like a good chair to match it. She's just using an occasional chair right now, and ..."

LIKE EVERYTHING he gave her, Mary liked his gift extremely well, and night after night, after the birthday, he came home to find her at the desk, using the chair, captaining her house and her servant staff. And the improvement was noticeable in her, almost from the first day. Within a month, he could detect a remarkable change, and for the first

time, since they had been married, Mary gave a dinner for thirty people without crying just before it started.

There were other changes.

Quay brought in efficiency report after efficiency report, and by the end of three months, they had hit eighteen and seven-tenths percent increase. The administrative office was no longer the dull, listless place it had been; now it thrived and hummed like the shop below. Cutter could see the difference with his own eyes, and he could particularly see the differences in certain individuals.

Brown and Kennedy showed remarkable improvement, but it was really Harry Linden who astonished Cutter. An individual check showed a sixty-percent increase by Linden, and there was a definite change in the man's looks. He walked differently, with a quick, virile step, and the look of his face and eyes had become strong and alive. He began appearing early in the morning, ahead of the starting hour, and working late, and the only time he missed any work hours, was one afternoon, during which, Lucile informed Cutter, he had appeared in court for his divorce trial.

Within a month, Cutter had fired Stole and Lackter and Grant, as department heads, and replaced them with Brown, Kennedy, and Linden. He had formulated plans for installation of the Confidets in the drafting department and the supply department, and already the profits of increased efficiency were beginning to show in the records. Cutter was full of new enthusiasm and ambition, and there was only one thorn in the entire development.

Quay had resigned.

Cutter had been startled and extremely angry, but Quay had been unperturbed and stubborn. "I've enjoyed working with you immensely, George, but my mind is made up. No hard feelings?"

Cutter had not even shaken his hand.

It had bothered him for days, and he checked every industrial company in the area, to see where Quay had found a better position. He was highly surprised, when he learned, finally, that Quay had purchased a small boat and was earning his living by carrying fishermen out onto the Bay. Quay had also married, four days after his resignation, and Cutter pushed the entire thing out of his mind, checking it off to partial insanity.

By February of the next year, he had promoted Harry Linden to

Quay's old job, gotten rid of the deadwood that showed up so plainly on the individual checks, and the total efficiency average had reached thirty-three percent. His and Mary's anniversary was on the fourth of March, and when that day arrived, he was certain that he had reached that point where he could expand to another plant.

He was about to order her a mink stole in celebration, but it was also that day that he was informed that she was suing him for divorce. He rushed home, furious, but she was gone. She had taken her clothes and jewelry and the second Cadillac. In fact, all that she had left of her personal possessions were the antique desk and chair. When the trial was over, months later, she had won enough support to take her to France, where, he learned, she purchased a chateau at Cannes. He tried to lose himself in his work, but for the first time in his life, he had begun to get faintly worried. It was only a sliver of worry, but it kept him from going on with the expansion. Stocks in the company had turned over at an amazingly rapid rate, and while it was still nothing more than intuition on his part, he began to tighten up, readying himself to meet anything.

The explosion came in July.

Drindor Products had picked up forty-nine percent of the stock on the market, by using secondary buyers. There had been a leak somewhere, Cutter realized, that had told his competitor, Drindor, the kind of profit he was making. He knew who it had been instantly, but before he could fire Harry Linden, all of his walls crashed down. Four months before, to put more esprit de corps into Linden, 48he had allowed Linden eight shares of his own stock, intending to pick it up later from the market. Linden had coerced with Drindor. Cutter lost control.

A board of directors was elected by Drindor, and Drindor assumed the presidency by proxy. Harry Linden took over Cutter's office, as Vice President In Charge.

Cutter had wildly ordered Edward Bolen to remove the Confidets one week before, but even then he had known that it was too late, and the smiling, knowing look on Bolen's face had infuriated him to a screaming rage. Bolen remained undisturbed, and quietly carried the disks away. Cutter, when he left his office that final day, moved slowly, very slowly.

HE BROODED for many long days after that, searching his mind for a

way to counterattack. He still had enough stock to keep him comfortable if he lived another hundred years. But he no longer had the power, and he thirsted for that. He turned it around and around in his brain, trying to figure out how he could do it, and the one thing he finally knew, the one certain thing, was that if he used enough drive, enough strength, then he would regain control of the company he had built with his own hands and mind.

He paced the library and the long living room and the dining room, and his eyes were lost, until he saw, through the doorway of the sewing room, that desk and that chair, and he remembered he hadn't done anything about that.

He paused only briefly, because he had not lost an ounce of his ability to make a sudden decision, and then he removed that disk and carried it to the library and fitted it under the cushion of the large, worn, leather chair.

By fall, he had done nothing to regain control, and he was less certain of how he should act than he had been months before. He kept driving by the plant and looking at it, but he did so carefully, so that no one would see him, and he was surprised to find that, above all, he didn't want to face Harry Linden. The memory of the man's firm look, the sharp, bold eyes, frightened him, and the knowledge of his fright crushed him inside. He wished desperately that Mary were back with him, and he even wrote her letters, pleading letters, but they came back, unopened.

Finally he went to see Robert Quay, because Quay was the only man in his memory whom he somehow didn't fear talking to. He found Quay in a small cottage near the beach. There was a six-day old infant in a crib in the bedroom, and Quay's wife was a sparkling-eyed girl with a smile that made Cutter feel relatively at ease for the first time in weeks.

She politely left them alone, and Cutter sat there, embarrassed faintly, but glad to be in Quay's home and presence. They talked of how it had been, when Quay was with the company, and finally Cutter pushed himself into asking about it:

"I've often wondered, Bob, why you left?"

Quay blushed slightly, then grinned. "I might as well admit it. 49I got one of those things from Bolen, and had it installed in my own chair." Cutter thought about it, surprised. He cleared his throat. "And then

you quit?"

"Sure," Quay said. "All my life, I'd wanted to do just what I'm doing. But things just came easy to me, and the opportunities were always there, and I just never had the guts to pass anything by. Finally I did." Quay smiled at him, and Cutter shifted in his chair. "The Confidet did that."

Cutter nodded.

It came to him suddenly, something he'd never suspected until that moment. There was something very definitely wrong with what had happened to him. The Confidet had affected everyone but him; there must have been something wrong with the one he had been using. It had worked with Mary, but hadn't Bolen said something about the energy being used in proportion to the demand? Mary had certainly created a demand. Bolen said the life of it was indefinite, but couldn't the energy have been used up?

"Ah," he said carefully, smiling, to Quay. "You wouldn't have it around, would you? That Confidet of yours?"

"Oh, hell, no," Quay said. "I gave it to Bolen a long time ago. He came around for it, in fact. Said he had to keep track of all of them."

Cutter left hurriedly, with Quay and his wife following him to his car. He drove straight to Bolen's house.

Fury built inside of him. All this time, Bolen had kept track of his Confidet, the one that Mary had used, and all this time, he had known Cutter still had it. Cutter was furious over the realization that Bolen had been using him for experimentation, and also because the Confidet that he had tried to use had turned worthless.

All his hatred, all his anger churned inside of him like the heat from shaken coals, but when he walked up the path to Bolen's small house, he did so quietly, with extreme care.

When he saw Bolen's face in the doorway, he wanted to strike the man, but he kept his hands quietly at his sides; and though he hated himself for it, he even smiled a little at the man.

"Come in," Bolen smiled, and he spoke softly, and at the same time he examined Cutter with quick, penetrating eyes. "Come in, Mr. Cutter." Cutter wanted to stand there and demand another Confidet, a good one, and not walk inside, politely, like he did. And he wished that his voice would come out, quickly, with the power and hate in it that he had once been capable of. But for some reason, he couldn't say a

word.

Bolen was extremely polite. "You've been using that Confidet, haven't you?" He spoke gently, almost as though he were speaking to a frightened child.

"Yes," Cutter managed to say.

"And what you expected to happen, didn't. That's what you want to tell me, isn't it?"

Cutter's insides quivered with rage, but he was able only to nod.

"Would you like to know why?" 50Bolen said.

Cutter rubbed his damp palms over his knees. He nodded.

Bolen smiled, his eyes sparkling. "Very simple really. It wasn't the fault of the Confidet so much, Mr. Cutter, as you. You see, you are a rare exception. What you are, or possibly I should say, what you were, was a complete super ego. There are very few of those, Mr. Cutter, in this world, but you happened to be one of them. A really absolute, complete super ego, and the Confidet's effect was simply the reverse of what it would have been with anyone else." Bolen shook his head, sympathetically, but he didn't stop smiling, and his eyes didn't stop their infuriating exploration of Cutter's face and eyes and hands. "It's really a shame, because I was almost certain you were a super ego, Mr. Cutter. And when you didn't return that last Confidet, I somehow felt that you might use it, after all that nasty business at the company and all.

"But while I was fairly certain of the effects, Mr. Cutter, I wasn't absolutely sure, you see, and so like the rest of the experiments, I had to forget my conscience. I'm really very sorry."

The anger was a wild thing inside Cutter now, and it made his hands tremble and sweat, and his mouth quiver, and he hated the man in front of him, the man who was responsible for what had happened to him, the smiling man with the soft voice and exploring eyes. But he didn't say anything, not a word. He didn't show his anger or his frustration or his resentment. He didn't indicate to Bolen a particle of his inner wildness.

He didn't have the nerve.

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The Project Gutenberg EBook of G-r-r-r...!, by Roger Arcot

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Roger Arcot explores the fringes of a really never forgotten world, the introduction to which is an aged manuscript *De Necromantiae*, and the wish, not too repressed, to pledge your soul to the Devil! There are many strange memories and unhappy frustrated souls in this Fantastic Universe of ours—strange and sinister memories and stranger urges, frightening urges that refuse to die in the heart of Brother Ambrose.

G-r-r-r...!

by ... ROGER ARCOT

He had borne the thousand and one injuries with humility and charity. But the insults! These were more than he could suffer....

GR-R-R! There he goes again! Brother Ambrose could scarce restrain the hatred that seethed and churned in his breast, as his smallish eyes followed Brother Lorenzo headed once more for his beloved geraniums, the inevitable watering-pot gripped in both hands, the inevitable devotions rising in a whispered stream from his saintly lips. The very fact the man lived was a mockery to human justice: God's blood, but if thoughts could only kill.

Ave, Virgo!

The thousand and one injuries of Fray Lorenzo he had borne as a Christian monk should, with humility and charity. But the insults, aye, the insults to faith and reason! They were more than a generous Father could expect His most adoring servant to suffer, weren't they? To have to sit next to the man, for instance, at evening meal and hear his silly prattle of the weather. Next year's crop of cork: we can

scarcely expect oak-galls, he says. Isn't petroselinum the name for parsley? (No, it's Greek, you swine. And what's the Greek name for Swine's Snout? I could hurl it at you, like the Pope hurling anathema.) Salve tibi! It sticks in one's craw to bless him with the rest. Would God our cloister numbered thirty-and-nine instead of forty. For days now, for weeks, Brother Ambrose had witnessed and endured the false piety of the man. How he'd ever got admitted to the order in the first place beat all supposition. It must have been his sanctimonious apple-cheeks or (Heaven forbid such simony), some rich relative greased the palm of the Prior. Saint, forsooth! Brother Ambrose recalled just a week previous; they had been outside the walls, a round dozen of the brothers, gathering the first few bushels of grapes to make the good Benedictine wine. And all men tended to their duty in the vineyard—save who? Save lecherous Lorenzo, whose job was to attend the press. Picked the assignment himself, most likely, so he could ogle the brown thighs and browner ankles of Dolores squatting on the Convent bank, gitana slut with her flashing eyes and hint of sweet delight in those cherry-red lips and coquettish tossing shoulders. A man could see she was child of the devil, flesh to tempt to eternal hellfire.

But how skillful Brother Lorenzo had been in keeping the glow in his dead eye from being seen by the others! Only Ambrose had known it was there. Invisible to even the world, perhaps; but lurking just the same in Lorenzo's feverishly disguised brain. Si, there and lusting beyond a doubt. By one's faith, the blue-black hair of Dolores would make any weak man itch; and the stories that had floated on the breeze that day, lively exchanged between her and that roguish Sanchicha, the lavandera; Lorenzo must surely have lapped them all up like a hungry spaniel, though he cleverly turned his head away so you would not guess. After all, Ambrose, scarcely a step closer, could recall clearly every word of the bawdy tales!

Back to the table again; and Brother Ambrose once more noticed how Fray Lorenzo never let his fork and knife lie crosswise, an obvious tribute he, himself, always made in Our Senor's praise. Nor did Lorenzo honor the Trinity by drinking his orange-pulp in three quiet sips; rather (the Arian heretic) he drained it at a gulp. Now, he was out trimming his myrtle-bush. And touching up his roses. Gr-r-r, again! Watching his enemy putter away in the deepening

twilight that followed the decline of the Andalusian sun, Brother Ambrose recalled the other traps he had lain to trip the hypocrite. Traps set and failed; but, oh, so delicious anyhow, these attempts to send him flying off to Hell where he belonged: a Cathar or a Manichee. That last one, involving the pornographic French novel so scrofulous and wicked. How could it failed to have snared its prey? Especially, when Fray Ambrose had spent such sleepless nights, working out his plot in great detail?

Brother Ambrose allowed himself an inward chortle, as he paced along the portico, recollecting how close to success the scheme had come. The book had had to be read first (or re-read, rather) by Ambrose to determine just which chapter would be most apt to damn a soul with concupiscent suggestion. Gray paper with blunt type, the whole book had been easy enough to grasp for that matter—what with the words so badly spelled out. The cuckoldry tales of Boccaccio and that gay old archpriest, Juan Ruiz de Hita, what dry reading they seemed by comparison—almost like decretals.

As if by misadventure, Brother Ambrose had left the book in Lorenzo's cell, the pages doubled down at the woeful sixteenth print. Ah, there had been a passage! Simply glancing at it, you groveled hand and foot in Belial's grip.

But, that twice-cursed Lorenzo must have had the devil's luck that day. A breeze sprang up to flip the volume closed; and the monk, not knowing the book's owner and spying only its name, had handed it over to the Prior who had promptly turned the monastery upside down in search of further such adulterous contraband!

Worse fortune followed. The next day, Brother Lorenzo had come down with a temporary stroke of blindness—it lasted only a week; but even so, for seven days Ambrose had been forced to labor in his stead in the drafty library, copying boresome scrolls in a light scarcely less dim than moonlight. Worse still, the Prior had found mistakes: letters dropped, transposed (Latin was so bothersomely regular; compared to the vulgar tongue). For what he called such "inexcusable slovenliness," the Prior had imposed a penance of bread and water and extra toil.

Slovenliness! Why didn't the Prior—was he blind, too?—notice the deadly sins that were each day so neatly practised by Brother Lorenzo? They went unpunished. Probably, God's Angel would even

be found to have been asleep when Judgment Day came around and Lorenzo would slip into Heaven by a wink, as one might say. Obviously, there was no justice, except such as man would make himself, Brother Ambrose had at last decided.

Ave Maria, plena gratia.

Now at last, he was alone in his cell, free finally from the unendurable (sometimes it seemed everlasting) torment of Brother Lorenzo's presence. Twenty-nine distinct damnations listed in Galatians, if you cared to look up the text; and not one of them could the enemy be made to trip on, a-dying.

In fact, of late, so bad had the situation grown that Brother Ambrose had even once considered pledging his soul to Satan. Oh, not for keeps! No enmity was worth that dread sacrifice. But as a trick, sort of—with a flaw in the indenture that proud Lucifer would miss until it was too late to wriggle out of the bargain.

But that had been two days ago.

Now, a better scheme presented itself to Brother Ambrose, engendered by that forced labor within the dreary precincts of the convent library. For that was where (and when) he had made his delightful discovery, the one that would now redeem him from all his irritations and travail. The discovery that would rid him of Brother Lorenzo for always!

It had happened like this.

Inasmuch as the monastery was over eight hundred years old, many ancient books and moldy scrolls lay forgotten in the cobwebby corners of the great library, especially where the light was gloomy. One afternoon during his week of enforced toil, Brother Ambrose had sought the shelter of one of these ill-lighted and seldom-visited nooks of the building to recover certain lost hours of sleep, hours that had gone astray the night before as he sat up in his lonely cell and brooded over his wrongs. But before his drowsy head could nod off into dreams completely, his eye had chanced to notice a faded scroll that jutted forth from its fellows on the shelves. Starting to push the offender back in place, Ambrose's fingers had hesitated when he noticed the title: *De Necromantiae*.

Surely, thought the monk, such a book belonged on the Index. Then, it occurred to him that possibly the copy in front of him was the only one of its kind in the world, in which case not even the Holy Father could

be expected to know it existed. Then, how could it be on the Index or be forbidden?

Taking advantage of this personal achievement in casuistry, Brother Ambrose promptly untied the scroll and began reading.

What he discovered there interested him very much. We do not intend to describe all of the marvels unfolded for him in that venerable mildewed manuscript, for some of the more gruesome mysteries of the supernatural world are better left unrevealed; but let it be said at least, that one chapter intrigued Brother Ambrose immensely. So much so, that he shamelessly whipped out his scissors and, nipping that section, stuck it inside his rough wool robes so he might peruse it at greater leisure within the privacy of his cell.

The chapter that evoked such delight and interest within Brother Ambrose's complicated brain was one that had been penned in the early ages of the Church by a lay-brother who had concerned himself with pagan magic. In it, he had described the fiendish habits and activities of werewolves and had actually even presented a formula. *Ut Fiat Homo Lupinus* it was entitled, which purported to give the secret words and ritual necessary to achieve the transformation from man to beast.

At last, the opportunity had arrived Ambrose's way to achieve his long-desired revenge on Brother Lorenzo!

Twenty-four hours had passed since the momentous discovery. The moment was at hand. Night again had settled upon the Spanish cloisters, the last bell had tolled; and all the good and hardy men were supposed to be at sound sleep on their rough iron cots. But in Brother Ambrose's chilly cell, a small candle burned—casting sickly light that produced huge flickering shadows against the whitewashed walls. Brother Ambrose held the treasured piece of manuscript between his hands. It was difficult to make out the faded Latin; the writing was cramped and crude, and Ambrose was no scholar to boot. But like all persons of his times, he was quite well-aware of the existence of werewolves, werefoxes, and other such monsters; and he held no doubt but what the spell would work.

It was the scheming brother's plan to creep in the stealth of night down the corridor to the barred oak door of Lorenzo's own simple cell. There, he would knock; lightly enough to disturb no other sleepers, yet loud enough that the rapping would summon Brother Lorenzo from

whatever wicked dreams might be festering in his own sleeping mind. As Fray Lorenzo's naked footsteps were heard pattering across the bare floor, Ambrose would drink the bat's blood he had collected, sniff the wolfbane he had ground to ash, and pronounce the obscure Celtic words that would alter the very atoms of his flesh, transforming them into an obscene travesty of life. Brother Lorenzo, when he opened the door, would be met not by a fellow human being, but by a snarling fanged wolf that would hurl its hairy bulk at the drowsy monk's own throat.

The next day, the entire monastery would be awakened, of course, by shouts of the news that foul murder had been discovered. But no amount of detection would ever manifest the bestial murderer. Brother Ambrose would hug to his soul the secret of his crime until the day of his shriving.

At length, the hour had grown so late that it was certain even the Prior himself must have long since retired.

Brother Ambrose made ready to carry out his deed. He rose from his cot, removed the coarse brown robe that normally he wore to bed as well as in his daily rounds so that his long-unwashed body stood naked. There must be no chance for tell-tale blood to stain his clothes, when his fierce talons and wolfish teeth tore and rended at human flesh.

Carrying his precious piece of scroll, he departed from his cell and groped his way down the stone corridor until the light improved enough for him to see his way. Luckily, a patch of moonlight illuminated the very space in front of the accursed Brother Lorenzo's door. What fortune!

Brother Ambrose halted and stared at the door as though his eyes could see through it, at the sleeping form within. He sucked in a deep breath. His palms were sweaty; his heartbeat rapid. For a moment, he was almost ready to back out.

Then suddenly, the memory of all the hundreds of grudges he bore against Lorenzo surged through him. Hatred built up a massive reservoir, that broke out over his crumbling conscience and flooded his body with anger and wild resentment. His teeth gritted. What had he been thinking of—to retreat now, with revenge so nearly at hand! He rapped. A moment later, he heard a creaking sound like Brother Lorenzo slipping out of bed.

Trembling, he lifted the phial of bat's blood, drank it down. It tasted salty. He chewed on the wolfbane powder until it mixed with the saliva of his mouth, then he swallowed. Holding the ancient scroll-segment before him, he began to repeat the badly-written incantation: *Ut fiat homo lupinus, pulvis arnicae facenda est et dum....*

A thousand jolts assailed his body, as if he had been struck by all the lightnings in heaven. Then, came a rushing paralysis, a distortion of time and space, a dread feeling of disintegration and death ...

The door to Brother Lorenzo's cell began to recede, swelling in volume as it did. The ceiling of the corridor likewise retreated at ever-increasing pace. Staring down at his own dwindling frame, Ambrose saw that the slug-white flesh was now covered with thick fur, even as the limbs were gnarling—

Then, suddenly the door opened. Brother Lorenzo stepped out, his kindly pious face wrinkled with sleep but otherwise showing no irritation or displeasure at being summoned from his rest. At first, the monk seemed not to have noticed Ambrose's form, for he gazed above him and away.

Ambrose kept on shrinking.

Finally, Brother Lorenzo's gaze chanced to glance downward. But still, his features mirrored no recognition or alarm; only puzzlement.

Now, thought Ambrose, now is the time for me to snarl.

But no snarl, nor semblance of a snarl, emerged from his lips. Rather, his lips had elongated into long sucking proboscises, while already a third pair of limbs had commenced growing from his furred-over abdomen.

This was not a wolf-like form, he was assuming, Ambrose suddenly realized in terror. But if it was not lupine, what was it? Had he misread the incantation? Had he mispronounced a simple word?

The weird crawling form into which he had metamorphosed was now hardly an inch higher than the surface of the floor. But Ambrose's eyes had bulged into great many-faceted orbs capable of seeing objects with greater clarity than ever. Inches away from him, he made out the segment of scroll he had discarded after reading aloud from it.

Crawling over to it, he perused the beginning words of the spell.

And it suddenly dawned on him (while what passed for a heart and ventricles within his pulpy form began simulating horror) that the ancient monk of centuries ago who had first copied the incantation

must have been as careless of spelling as he. For the charm obviously did not convert its user into a werewolf, but rather some other animal ...

Dredging up all the miserable Latin he knew, Ambrose fished for some word similar to *lupinus*.

And suddenly he had it!

Pulicus! That was the word the sloppy copyist of yesteryear had wrongly transcribed.

From the word *pulex*, meaning "flea."

Not how to become a wolf-like man, but a flea-like man—that was what the formula had described.

Ambrose, the flea, braced himself. Gathering his powerful legs under him, he leaped in soaring flight to land upon the object of hatred—the giant Brother Lorenzo, who towered so high above him.

But the gentle and considerate Brother Lorenzo, who probably would not have hurt hair nor hide of any other creature on Earth—even he knew full well that there is only one thing you can do to discourage a flea.

Swat!

Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from Fantastic Universe January 1957. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.

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DOGFIGHT-1973

By
Mack Reynolds

Flying at 1600 m.p.h. you act with split-second timing after you sight the enemy. And you're allowed only one mistake—your last!

MY radar picked him up when he was about five hundred miles to my north-northeast and about forty-five miles above me. I switched the velocity calculator on him as fast as I could reach it.

The enemy ship was doing sixteen, possibly even sixteen and a half. I took the chance that it was most likely an Ivar Interceptor, at that speed, and punched out a temporary evasion pattern with my right hand while with my left I snapped an Ivar K-12 card into my calculator

along with his estimated speed, altitude and distance. It wasn't much to go on as yet but he couldn't have much more on me, if as much; inwardly I congratulated myself on the quick identification I'd managed.

He was near enough now for my visor screen to pick him up. At least he was alone, that was something. My nearest squadron mate was a good minute and a half away. It might as well have been a century. Now, this is what is always hard to get over to a civilian; the time element. Understand, it will take me a while to tell this but it all took less than sixty seconds to happen.

He had guessed my evasion pattern already—either guessed it or had some new calculator that was far and beyond anything our techs were turning out. I could tell he'd anticipated me by the Bong-Sonic roll he slipped into.

I quickly punched up a new pattern based on the little material I had in the calculator. At least I'd caught the roll. I punched that up, hurriedly, slipped it into the IBM, guessed that his next probability was a pass, took a chance on that and punched it in.

I was wrong there. He didn't take his opportunity for a front-on pass. He was either newly out of their academy or insultingly confident. My lips felt tight as I canceled the frontal pass card, punched up two more to take its place.

The base supervisor cut in on the phone. "It looks like old Dmitri himself, Jerry, and he's flying one of the new K-12a models. Go get him, boy!"

I felt like snapping back. He knew better than to break in on me at a time like this. I opened my mouth, then shut it again. Did he say K-12a? Did he say K-12a?

I squinted at the visor screen. The high tail, the canopy, the oddly shaped wing tanks.

I'd gone off on the identification!

I slapped another evasion pattern into the controls, a standard set, I had no time to punch up an improvisation. But he was on me like a wasp. I rejected it, threw in another set. Reject. Another!

Even as I worked, I kicked the release on my own calculator, dumped it all, selected like a flash an Ivar K-12a card, and what other estimations I could make while my mind was busy with the full-time job of evasion.

My hands were still making the motions, my fingers were flicking here, there, my feet touching here, there. But my heart wasn't in it. He already had such an advantage that it was all I could do to keep him in my visor screen. He was to the left, to the right. I got him for a full quarter-second in the wires, but the auto gunner was too far behind, much too far.

His own guns flicked red.

I punched half a dozen buttons, slapped levers, tried to scoot for home.

To the left of my cubicle two lights went yellowish and at the same time my visor screen went dead. I was blind.

I sank back in my chair, helpless.

THE speed indicator wavered, went slowly, deliberately to zero; the altimeter died; the fuel gauge. Finally, even the dozen or so trouble-indicators here, there, everywhere about the craft. Fifteen million dollars worth of warcraft was being shot into wreckage.

I sat there for a long, long minute and took it.

Then I got to my feet and wearily opened the door of my cubicle.

Sergeant Walters and the rest of the maintenance crew were standing there. They could read in my face what had happened.

The sergeant began, "Captain, I ..."

I grunted at him. "Never mind, Sergeant. It had nothing to do with the ship's condition." I turned to head for the operations office.

Bill Dickson strolled over from the direction of his own cubicle.

"Somebody said you just had a scramble with old Dmitri himself."

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know if it was him or not. Maybe some of you guys can tell a man's flying but I can't."

He grinned at me. "Shot you down, eh?"

I didn't answer.

He said, "What happened?"

"I thought it was an Ivar K-12, and I put that card in my calculator.

Turned out it was one of those new models, K-12a. That was enough, of course."

Bill grinned at me again. "That's two this week. That flak got you near that bridge and now you get ..."

"Shut up," I told him.

He counted up on his fingers elaborately. "The way I figure it, you lose

one more ship and you're an enemy ace."

He was irrepresible. "Damn it," I said, "will you cut it out! I've got enough to worry about without you working me over. This means I'll have to spend another half an hour in operations going over the fight. And that means I'll be late for dinner again. And you know Molly." Bill sobered. "Gee," he said, "I'm sorry. War is hell, isn't it?"

Transcriber's Note:

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The Project Gutenberg EBook of Unthinkable, by Roger Phillips
Graham

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The doctor did a very strange thing; he pulled out a gun and shot himself through the head.

UNTHINKABLE

By ROG PHILLIPS

If Nature suddenly began to behave differently, what we consider obvious and elementary today might become—unthinkable.

IN the story THE DESPOILERS in the October 1947 Amazing Stories I raised the question, "Is there anything absolutely beyond human comprehension?" In that story I gave humanity a thousand years to give birth to one man who could comprehend the incomprehensible.

The incomprehensible is harder to portray in a story than is merely the unknown. If we denote anything incomprehensible by the symbol X, we can describe what X is to a certain extent by knowing what it is not. We can, gradually, gain a certain insight into what it is by comparing it to what IS comprehensible.

In the last analysis the universe of normalcy is incomprehensible. We have made progress in comprehending it because we have isolated it into small bundles of events that can be dealt with by the human intellect.

We have arrived at certain basic pictures of the behavior of the incomprehensible. We have found a certain stability existing in the picture we have built up. We have searched the heavens and found that stars are made up of the same elements as the Earth—with a few exceptions. And with those exceptions we have brought them into the framework of our picture of the Universe by postulating "dense matter."

We have, slowly, come to the belief that the same laws operate throughout the entire Universe, just as they do here on the Earth. This is the Uniformity Postulate.

In that story THE DESPOILERS the Uniformity Postulate was not

denied. The incomprehensible in that story was the mind of a Despoiler. It, to the human mind, was incomprehensible; and to the Despoiler, the human mind was incomprehensible. Each viewed the Universe differently due to a difference in whatever lies at the foundations of the thinking processes. In other words, uniformity of the principle of thought was denied there. Both the Despoilers and Man had mechanical civilization and science, but due to their different minds neither could comprehend completely the viewpoint of the other ON THE SAME THING. Each had applied his REASON to the disorder of nature and constructed what to him was a REASONABLE PICTURE.

The type of mentality I attributed to the Despoiler may be impossible. It may be that if the human race eventually reaches out and encounters other intelligent races it will find that the basic principles which result in thought as we know it are the ONLY basic principles that can give rise to thinking intelligence, so that wherever we find civilization we will find creatures that think the same as we do, and have seen the same pattern in nature that we have.

There is another possibility besides the encountering of incomprehensible minds. That is the possibility of encountering incomprehensible "islands" of reality.

One thing we have discovered about nature that makes such "islands" possible—or that makes it possible WE are living in such an "island"—is that matter has a habit of "reacting" to some types of energy patterns, and "totally ignoring" others.

Perhaps you can better understand what I mean by the following analogous position: Kah is an intelligent entity fixed at a certain point. He can only derive a picture of reality from what he sees. He can only see a foot in front of him. In all his existence he has seen only one type of thing—rocks about an inch in diameter. He therefore concludes that all reality is rocks an inch in diameter.

He is unable ever to learn that he is situated at a place where the one-inch rocks leave a screen with seven-eighths-inch holes that let every smaller pebble and all the sand through, and that seven-eighths-inch screen is the catch-all for a higher screen with one-inch holes that kept everything larger from coming through.

His Universe is brought to him by selective screening. He rationalizes what his Universe presents him, and postulates that ALL reality is

identical to what he can experience. He can NOT conceive of what is utterly beyond his range of experience and imagination—which is merely the re-arrangement of reality or of thoughts derived from reality.

We are perhaps in much that same position. To be sure, our telescopes bring us data from stars that are so far away the human race will never reach them—but is not our telescope a "screen" that brings us only the one-inch rocks?

There may be and probably is a vast realm of reality co-existent with the reality we know, right around us; but it is "screened" from us. It may be possible that we know less than ten percent of actual reality around us due to the screening of our senses and our instruments that blocks completely, or permits to pass completely, every energy pattern that can't pass through the "holes" of our "screen."

Going back to Kah, the one-inch-rock-universe observer, suppose that in one batch of dirt dumped at the head of the screening system there happened to be no one-inch rocks at all? Or, more closely to the story you are about to read, suppose, with his mind deeply grooved with the tracks of the one-inch rocks, he were to move to a vantage point where there were no one-inch rocks, but larger or smaller ones?

He would immediately find nature behaving according to an utterly strange pattern, BUT he could only sort the incoming sensations according to the neural grooves already built up in his mind! In his mind he could only see one-inch rocks or nothing, and since what he would see would obviously be something, it would either seem nothing to him, or one-inch rocks behaving strangely.

His instruments and his mind would interpret by the old gradations and scales and concepts. His Universe would still be made of nothing but one-inch rocks, to him, but its behavior would be strange.

Perhaps slowly, like a newborn child making sense out of its surroundings, or a foreigner slowly making sense out of our language, he would penetrate to the new reality with his mind. Perhaps in the very process his being would change its structure.

In the end he would be in a unique position. He would have the memories of one Reality, and the experiences of a new one. He would have the language of the old with which to describe the new to his old companions. Could he do it so they would comprehend it?

It would do him no good simply to invent new words to describe

something beyond the experience of his old companions. He would have to describe something beyond their experience with words and sentences they had created to describe only what they had gained from their own experience! How could he hope to make them gain a true understanding of it?

He might tell them simply and truthfully everything he experienced—and it might come out utter nonsense! It probably would. Unless he could bring back some of the evidence, either intentionally or unwittingly.

At first that evidence might present a pattern of utter nonsense and contradiction with known thought patterns and concepts. It might present seemingly normal events in nonsense sequences. It might present impossible events in seemingly normal sequences. It might even present disjointed events in sequence.

What it would present would be only what the screen of the senses and the screen of the mind could accept. Underneath would be a perfectly orderly pattern of events of some sort, behaving according to different natural laws in conflict with those we have existed under.

Slowly we might penetrate to an understanding of them, but not at first, because at first they would be completely UNTHINKABLE.

In this story, UNTHINKABLE, an attempt has been made to depict such a conflict of nature and human mentality. It is not the ordinary science fiction attempt. It is not new laws working in harmony with old, or new discoveries that fit into the old pattern. It is, if you please, an utterly alien bit of reality in conflict with the old.

The story cannot but be inadequate. It is the froth and foam of the struggle. It is the parts that fit into the words and phrases and sentences. You won't like it at all—unless you have the type of mind that can reach a little way beyond experience. And though what you may "see" may have no counterpart in all reality, if this story serves to expand your mental horizons, it has at least found an excuse for being written.

—ROG PHILLIPS

DR. NALE HARGRAVE tossed his spotless grey hat expertly across the six feet of space between him and the coat tree, humming the while a currently popular tune whose only words he could remember were "Feemo fimo fujo, the flumy fwam to fwojo."

His eyes rested self-congratulatingly on the hat after it came to a safe stop, then turned to beam an instant at his receptionist before he continued on to his office.

She smiled after him with an affectionate, indulgent look, gave him as long as it took her to powder her nose and tuck a few stray hairs into place, then pressed the buzzer that signaled to quarantine that the doctor was ready to screen the crew of the U triple S Endore.

The Endore had arrived during the night. Usually crews that had to wait hours before passing through psych raised a big fuss. Quarantine wasn't exactly designed for comfort. A man couldn't be expected to enjoy sitting on a bench and reading a worn-out magazine after looking forward to visiting his old haunts on Earth after months or years in space. His only thought was to get through the red tape and step through the door on the other side of which lay freedom of expression and freedom from space discipline—and girls.

That was the usual result of forced delay in quarantine. The crew of the Endore hadn't let a peep out of them.

Martha Ryan, the receptionist, glanced knowingly at the closed door. She knew that Nale was sitting at his desk, his legs crossed carelessly, his long fingers holding the report on the Endore and the report of the psych observer. He was probably frowning slightly over the unusual behavior of the crew.

She had her own list of names of the crew on the desk before her. Heading the list was the name, Comdr. Hugh Dunnam. Dr. Nale would ordinarily call him first. Next would come any of the crew that the commander reported unbalanced, followed by the rest of the crew. Sometimes when the psych observer's report was unfavorable to the whole crew he called some crew member at random before calling the top name.

It didn't surprise her, therefore, when the intercom came to life and Dr. Nale's voice pleasantly asked for a name two-thirds of the way down on the list of forty names—Ren Gravenard, spaceman/2d cls.

Martha's pencil followed the list down, making a light check after the name while she dialed quarantine to send in the man.

In her mind's eye she could visualize the lifted eyebrows of the day shift guards as they glanced over the huddled crew. She could see their suddenly changed attitude toward the crew, their new caution as they opened the heavy wire door and led the man out. She could see,

too, the worried frown of Comdr. Dunnam, whoever he was, as he realized what that meant—to have a crew member precede him. She could see, too, Dunnam's probable warning look to spaceman Gravenard to keep mum and play his cards close. That was the trouble with crews of ships when they thought they might be held up by psych over something. They invariably overplayed their innocence right from the start.

The side door from quarantine opened. Two guards entered, preceding and following the first victim warily. Martha sized Ren Gravenard up closely while her face assumed the careful, welcoming smile that often brought attempts at dating.

Ren Gravenard was no different in appearance than a million like him. He was average in everything including his type of character. "You are Ren Gravenard?" she asked.

He nodded without speaking.

Martha pressed the button that told Doctor Nale the first one had arrived, got his O.K. signal, and motioned Gravenard and the guards toward the inner door with a sweep of long yellow pencil in perfectly manicured fingers.

As the three passed into the private office she made a slow dash after the spaceman's name preparatory to writing his destination when he came out. It would be "obs" or "O.K."

Then she glanced at her wrist watch. Its hands pointed to six after nine. Two hours and fifty-four minutes later Ren Gravenard had still not come out. And in her two years as receptionist for Dr. Nale Hargrave, Martha Ryan had never known him to spend more than twenty minutes with any subject....

Her manicured nail pressed the buzzer three times to signal she was going to lunch. Giving Dr. Nale a full minute to make any request, without receiving any, she opened the door to the corridor and left.

WHEN she returned an hour later she was surprised to see the door to Dr. Hargrave's inner office open and Dr. John Bemis, the chief of the psych staff, at the desk.

"Come in, Miss Ryan," Dr. Bemis said, accenting his invitation with a wave of his hand.

He waited until she had come in and closed the door behind her before continuing.

"There's something's happened," he said gravely. "I don't know just what, and maybe I don't exactly WANT to know."

Dr. Bemis spread his hands in an all inclusive gesture.

"The universe is a big place," he said. "I suppose we should have expected that sooner or later we'd run into something a little outside normal experience."

He shook his head slowly, looking up at the ceiling as though trying to pierce it and see beyond. When he continued, his voice was sharp and businesslike.

"Tell me exactly what you saw, thought, and felt this morning. Every detail, however unimportant you might think it."

"There's really very little to tell," Martha said, surprised and alarmed.

"There was this crew of the Endore in quarantine when I came to work this morning. They were unusual in that they didn't complain about having to wait, indicating a guilt feeling in the crew. Dr. Hargrave asked to see a common spaceman first. That proved he recognized this. The name of the spaceman he saw is Ren Gravenard, who was brought in at a little after nine and was still in there when I left at twelve."

She looked keenly at Dr. Bemis. Something was so radically wrong somewhere that she didn't have the courage to even ask him. She just waited.

"Dr. Hargrave has been taken to observation," he said without warning. "So has the crew of the Endore. I—ah—believe you may take an indefinite leave from the office until further notice. With full pay, of course."

"Dr. Hargrave?" Martha asked, not hearing the last.

"Yes!" Dr. Bemis's voice changed from harsh tenseness to contriteness. "I'm sorry, Miss Ryan, but I feel it inadvisable to discuss it just now. All I can say is that full quarantine measures are now in force as of fifteen minutes ago. There will be no landing or taking off from Earth until it is lifted; and within this area the same quarantine applies." [1]

Martha Ryan hesitated, then turned and left. Dr. Bemis watched her go. After the door closed behind her he did a very peculiar thing. He took a gun out of his coat pocket and shot himself through the head. After that he went to a mirror on the wall, dressed the wounds carefully, wincing at the bite of the alcohol in the raw flesh, and, after

drinking several glasses of water, returned to Dr. Hargrave's desk.

HE sat there, drumming his fingers on the walnut surface, his eyes closed as if he were listening to something very far away. A buzzer under his desk gave three short buzzes. He reached over and deflected the toggle on the intercom.

"Back already, Martha?" he said cheerily. "Any more left on your list for the Endore?"

Martha checked her list. There had been two left when she went to lunch. They had been checked off, too, while she was gone.

"That's all, Dr. Nale," she said.

"Good," came his voice through the intercom. "Think I'll go out and have something to eat myself."

The click of the intercom was followed at once by the opening of the inner office door. Martha's eyes watched Dr. Nale Hargrave as he walked through the office and out into the corridor.

Her eyes remained on the exit after he had gone, a faint frown creasing the smooth skin above her eyes. She had an IRRATIONAL impression that she had seen Dr. Bemis, the super, instead of Dr. Nale, and with his head bandaged clumsily.

She dismissed this with a pout and took a book out of a drawer to do her afternoon reading.

The buzzer on her desk buzzed a warning. She laid the book flat as the inner office door opened and Dr. Nale escorted Ren Gravenard out into the waiting room.

Martha glanced at her watch. It was ten after nine. Four minutes! She expected the nod from Dr. Nale. Her pencil wrote an O.K. after the dash she had drawn four minutes ago.

"Thank you doctor," Ren Gravenard was saying heartily. The two guards left by the side door back to quarantine.

Dr. Nale went over and bent close to Martha's ear.

"As your psychiatrist," he said pseudo-seriously, "I can advise you that unless you kiss me I am going to feel quite frustrated."

"Oh, that would never do!" Martha laughed, and kissed him.

She jerked back, startled. There was the sound of a shot from the inner office. The door was still open. Martha and Dr. Nale looked through the door, horrified.

Ren Gravenard was standing in the middle of the inner office dropping

a flat automatic into his side pocket. There was an ugly wound on either side of his head from a bullet that had passed directly through his brain.

He smiled at them disarmingly, "It's quite all right. You see, it couldn't possibly do me any harm because I'm waiting for the elevator."

"Oh," they said, relieved. They bent and kissed each other again while Ren Gravenard went over to the mirror on the wall and dressed the wounds, wincing from the raw touch of the alcohol on wounded bone and flesh.

The outer door opened and two men came in with a wicker basket. Dr. Nale pointed over in the corner where one of the guards lay dead. "What happened to him, Doc?" one of the men asked.

"He got shot through the head," Dr. Hargrave explained. "One of the men off the Endore did it. They're all being taken over to observation. I think I'll have to go over with them. I'm beginning to get an inkling of what's going on, and I'm very much afraid of what I think it is."

The two men set the basket down and lifted the wicker lid. Dr. Bemis came out of the inner office and laid down in the corner. The two men waited until he had settled himself, then lifted him into the basket.

Dr. Hargrave held open the outer door for them. He returned to the desk beside Martha and took a gun out of his coat pocket. He pointed it at her, frowned in indecision, then slowly, with perspiration standing out on his forehead, pulled out the clip and emptied the barrel of the gun.

"Good for you," Martha said. She picked up her book and started reading. Dr. Hargrave put the gun back in his pocket and went to the door.

"Take a few days off starting tomorrow," he said before going out. "I'm going to be slowly going crazy trying to figure this mess out. That's why I insisted to Dr. Bemis that I be confined with the crew of the Endore—just in case."

His heels made loud noises on the marble floor of the corridor. He pushed through the revolving doors to the sidewalk.

There was an argument going on between a small newsboy and an elderly gentlemen type of man.

"I tell you there's only two pennies," the boy insisted.

"There's four," the man insisted just as strongly. "See?"

He pried open the boy's fingers and looked.

"Sorry," he said. "You're right." His hand went into his pocket to make up the deficit.

"Hey! Wait a minute," the boy said. "I was wrong. You gave me two pennies too much."

A small pudgy finger took two of the pennies. The boy glanced at the others to make sure the right number were left.

Nale was close enough to see what happened. He saw the pennies taken from what seemed to be seven or eight in the boy's palm. When the two were taken away there seemed to be a slight blur—and there was only a solitary penny left.

He didn't wait. The paper boy and the customer were still patiently arguing as he climbed into his car and drove away. He drove slowly with his foot close to the brakes.

Although his eyes were warily watching each car on the street, his mind was busy. He was trying to figure out who had been shot.

"It might even have been me!" he thought. And there was no way of knowing.

He drove the car another block. There was doubt growing in his mind. On a sudden impulse he pulled the car over to the curb and stopped the motor. Getting out, he started walking rapidly. There would be three miles of walking before he reached observation, but it would be safer to walk.

A block further he stopped abruptly in surprise. The spaceport observation hospital was just in front of him.

"I should have guessed," he muttered as he pushed through the heavy doors. "The speedometer, of course. Naturally it would go first."

MARTHA RYAN saw the door close on Dr. Hargrave, then started reading again. She finished the page and turned it over. The first few words of the opposite side of the sheet showed the continuity to be difficult.

Thinking she might have turned two sheets by mistake, she turned back one. It was still wrong. She sighed exasperatedly. She distinctly remembered that she had been on page twenty-five, so the next page should be twenty-six. Since it hadn't been, she would have to look for twenty-six.

She looked through the book, page by page, and it wasn't there. Getting over her exasperation she made a game of it. Finally she

developed to the stage where she would open the book at random, note the number of the page, close the book, and then try to find that page she had just seen.

It was a very peculiar book. She found that, (a) she could find any page number she wasn't looking for, and (b) any page number she looked for was not in the book, even though it had been a moment before.

Resting thoughtfully for several minutes on this achievement of deduction she decided to try another experiment. She counted the number of sheets of paper in the book and wrote the number down. It was one hundred twenty-four.

Then she counted them again. There were one hundred eighty-six. She counted them five more times, making seven times she had counted them. She got nine different numbers of sheets in the book. She decided she couldn't get nine different numbers after counting only seven times, and counted the numbers. There were five. She closed her eyes and counted to ten rapidly, then counted them again. There were fourteen.

She held out her hands. She had seven fingers on her right hand and three on her left. She chuckled dryly and thought, "Well, anyway there are ten altogether." She counted them to be sure, and there were thirteen.

Pursing her lips stubbornly she held up two fingers and counted them. There were two. She held them rigid and closed her eyes, counting rapidly to ten. Opening her eyes she looked cautiously at the upraised fingers. There were two.

She raised a third finger to join the other two, and there were five upraised fingers. Not only that, there were seven of them clenched. She closed her eyes and counted to ten quickly, then opened them. There were three upraised fingers. She counted the clenched ones and there were two. Relieved, she checked on the upraised fingers again—and there were seven.

She gave up in disgust. Deciding she ought to go home she stood up and started to cross to the coat tree.

The door to the corridor opened and Ren Gravenard stepped in. "Hello!" Martha said in surprise. "I thought you were sent to observation."

"I was," Ren said. "That's where I am now, but when there are forty of

you, you can sort of get lost in the group and wind up anywhere you want to."

"Well, I'm glad you're here," Martha said dryly. "Maybe you can explain a few things."

Ren grinned crookedly.

"Suppose I do the explaining over something to eat," he said. "I almost stopped and had something on the way over here, but I wanted to wait and eat with you. Do you mind?"

"Of course not," Martha frowned. She was taking a closer look at this spaceman second class. He had a nice way of smiling at her. His eyes had depths she hadn't noticed before.

THE illogical thought came to her that maybe now that things didn't behave the way they should, maybe he and his fellow spacemen were the only ones that knew what it was all about.

"All this," Martha waved her hand vaguely. "It must have been caused by something about the Endore, mustn't it?"

Ren nodded, holding the door open for her. They walked along the corridor to the revolving doors, his hand tucked protectively under her arm.

"Is it mental?" Martha asked when they were on the sidewalk.

"No," Ren answered. "But let's wait until we eat. I'm starved to death. If you run into any trouble I'll help you out. You see, I know how to work things."

"Like finding page twenty-six in the book I'm reading?" Martha asked.

"That's simple," Ren said. "All you have to do is look for page twenty-nine and you'll run across page twenty-six right away. Things like that are mental, partly. I mean, you have to have the right attitude to get results you want."

"I don't understand," Martha said.

"Well, it's like this," Ren explained. "If you're looking for page twenty-six it won't be one of the first two pages you look at, regardless of where you open the book. But after you've looked at three of them you've passed the page you want unless you're not looking for it. If you're not looking for it you REACH the right page."

"But why page twenty-nine to find twenty-six?" Martha persisted.

"It has to do with the new arithmetic," Ren said.

"Oh," Martha said dully. "So that's the whole trouble with everything."

"No, that's only part of it," Ren said. "But here's a good place to eat." He guided her through the door.

An hour later Ren lit a cigarette and took a long drag on it, his eyes looking longingly into Martha's. He exhaled the smoke in a long white plume. Then he began talking.

"I don't know whether you read it on the report sheet or not, but the trip of the Endore began from this same spaceport two years ago. The observatory on Pluto had reported a free planet passing within two hundred quadrillion miles of the solar system. The Endore was assigned the task of landing on it, if feasible.

"I had been a member of the crew for only four months when the Endore turned outward from its position just the other side of Mars' orbit."

Ren smiled apologetically.

"I hadn't exactly planned on being a spaceman, second class. I don't know whether you know the system, but whether you do or not, it should suffice to say that I had studied for five years to become a research scientist, and failed. I decided to take out my disappointment by joining up for two years. I planned on making another try at research when I got out.

"Everything went along fine on the trip out. We were a very congenial crew with a fine, human commander. He made it a point to get personally acquainted with every member of the crew eventually. He seemed to take a particular liking to me for some reason. By the time we were half-way out to Metapor, as we found out it was called later, I was an unofficial first mate or something with free run of the pilot room and the instruments.

"I had guessed by now that when I enlisted they looked up my record and passed the word along to Commander Dunnam to sell me on the idea of a career as a spaceman.

"At any rate, I was in an ideal position to see all that went on first hand. We were within three hundred thousand miles of Metapor when we got the first indication of the change in metaphysics. I discovered it myself. I was helping the astrogator get the constants for the planet ..."

"TAKE a look at the gravity board, Ren," Ford Grattrick, the astrogator said. "What's she say?"

Ren looked at the fine black pointer on the gravity potentiometer. It pointed to a spot just two marks above the number ten on the dial.

"Ten and two tenths," Ren read.

"That can't be right," Ford frowned. "At this distance that would make this baby a super."

He came over and looked himself. While he was looking the pointer moved up to twenty and then down to six tenths.

"Must be out of order," Ford muttered. "Well, this'll give you experience with emergency equipment. Break out the manual gravity dish, Ren."

It was a fine coil spring in a glass tube. Other glass tubes fastened on, to make the length almost ten feet. At one g the spring with its weight would stretch out to the bottom. From there to a ten thousandth of a g the spring rose up to a point half-way.

Ren put it together speedily, placing it in the wall clamps designed to hold it. The glass itself was graduated with the scale of gravity strength. The cylindrical weight at the free end of the spring had a line on it that would coincide with the proper reading.

In practice it vibrated up and down so that it had to be read by estimation of the half-way point of the up and down motion.

Ren and Ford watched the red weight with its black line. It moved slowly and uniformly from the bottom to the top of the scale, from a full g to ten thousandth of a g, and back down again.

Meanwhile the gravity potentiometer (gravity board) was changing its reading constantly and erratically.

Ford licked his lips nervously and said, "Don't know what the old man'll say about this, but it looks like all we can say is that the thing has gravity."

"Why not call him and let him see for himself?" Ren asked.

Ford looked out the viewport at the round object in the distance and shook his head.

"I've got a hunch he knows it already," he said slowly. "The ship is probably on a nonsense track and the automatic tracker is either trying to find out what the law of gravity is, or is exploring for clues to light aberration. One gets you ten he'll give me a buzz in another minute."

He was right. The phone rang almost at once. It was Hugh Dunnam himself, asking for the gravity reading.

"You'll have to see it to believe it," Ford Gratrack said over the phone. "The manual swing is uniform over the whole range. The gravity board can't make up its mind where to settle at. It tries this and that reading." He listened briefly. "Yes, sir," he said, and hung up. "He wants you in the pilot room, Ren," he added.

Ren started out of the central instrument room through the axis tube.

"Better be careful," Ford shouted after him. "No telling how this gravitation will behave. Don't let it slam you against anything."

Ren heard his words. He had a sudden, crazy thought that it was his own voice, and that he, as he sped along through the ship, was in reality Ford Gratrack. The thought startled him. He promptly forgot it. There was a frown of concentration on his face. He was trying to visualize a gravity pull whose intensity was not a single-valued pressure but a uniform continuum of pressure values from a minimum to a maximum.

It was like—well, like having an air pressure in a car tire that wasn't thirty pounds or thirty-two pounds, but every value from zero to thirty-five pounds.

It was like transforming the points and intervals on a line to a domain where there had previously been only points!

HUGH DUNNAM was waiting for him when he arrived in the pilot room. His iron grey hair was mussed from exasperated hair-pulling. He jabbed a finger in the direction of the automatic pilot without speaking.

Ren saw that it had been cut out. The first mate was controlling the ship manually. The robot mechanism was still turning out its data sheets, however. In five minutes Ren saw that the only consistent detail was the distance of the ship from the planet.

Commander Dunnam watched him silently for several minutes. Finally Ren laid down the data sheets and looked at him with a slow smile.

"Well?" Dunnam asked.

"It reminds me of a kid I knew quite well when I was in grade school," Ren said. "He was an incurable liar, so you could never take anything he said, but always had to figure out the truth yourself and act on it regardless of what he might claim to be the truth."

"You mean the instruments have all become liars?" Hugh Dunnam asked, amazed at the idea.

"No," Ren replied. "I don't think that. I think nature is the liar, in a way. I mean she is according to our standards. We'll have to outguess her, that's all."

"Now you're cooking," Hugh exclaimed. "What would you suggest?"

"We know this planet has gravity," Ren replied. "There's no way of knowing how much or how little. Suppose we kill our tangential speed and just fall in? The gravity will take care of that, regardless of its value or set of values."

"But we'll crash!" Hugh objected.

Ren took one of the report sheets and figured rapidly on its back.

"Unless I'm radically wrong," he said, "our speed of impact will be every speed from zero to a thousand miles a minute. Not only that, no matter how we try to land that will be the set of values for our speed. Naturally the thousand miles a minute will smash us flat, but the zero speed will let us down easy."

"And so?" Hugh asked suspiciously.

"No matter how we go in," Ren smiled, "we'll smash the ship and kill everybody—and we'll land safely."

"Are you crazy?" Hugh snorted.

"I—I'm not quite sure," Ren said seriously. "I think that we've run across a bit of matter that works from different basics than what we are used to. You might call it a different metaphysics. That's what it really amounts to."

A pain of remembrance appeared on his face.

"That's why I didn't get my degree," he said softly. "I insisted that it might be possible there were no absolute rules underlying all reality, but only relative rules that might be changeable. In other words, I questioned the validity of asserting that natural law was universal. They flunked me in stability."

"Yes, I know," Commander Dunnam said sympathetically. "One of the most unjust rules of modern education in the opinion of many, but no way of changing it unless the educators themselves did it. Since they all passed O.K. in stability, they think everyone else should. Maybe they're afraid they would be considered unstable if they wanted to make such a major change."

REN glanced toward the screen that showed the magnified image of the interstellar wanderer, and back again to the commander.

"Of course," he said, "I'm trying to use ordinary basics transposed onto the basics of this system, which is wrong. Or it may be right. It might be better if we just turned around and went back. There's no way of knowing ahead of time whether we'd be killed on landing or not."

"Look, Ren," the commander said seriously. "I like you. You—you're just about like my son would have been today if he had lived. I'm just a spaceman. I depend on instruments. They don't work here. All of us are just as helpless as if we didn't know the first thing about our trade. We can't go back without landing on this stray planet. If we tried to tell them the reasons, I'd be retired and the whole crew would be stuck on various routine tub runs. Suppose you unofficially take charge. If we get killed—we all expect to end that way in our trade. If we don't, we'll be able to take back something with us to prove what we've run into. Maybe it will vindicate you and make you a reputation. You'll get all the credit I can turn your way."

"Thank you, sir," Ren said, his voice choked with gratitude. In his heart he knew that he would have sold his soul to the devil for this coming experience that had been given him without his asking.

He had spent years preparing for this—years that his teachers had felt were wasted. He had explored all the crazy systems of logic abandoned in the march of progress. He had even devised systems of his own, synthesized from undefined symbols according to strange patterns outside the field of logic.

Yes. He felt that even if the basics of natural law in operation here were purely nonsense laws, he would be able to penetrate to a rational manipulation and control of things. Perhaps he might even set up the pattern operating, and join it in some way with so-called normal science.

Commander Dunnam came to attention, a twinkle in his eyes.

"At your command, sir," he said, saluting.

"Not that," Ren objected. "Let me just play the part of a scientist under your command, whose part it is to advise only."

"No," Hugh Dunnam said. "Until we leave this part of space you're in sole command. Call it what you want—a hunch maybe; but I feel that there is a purpose in things, and it wasn't chance that gave you the type of mind you have and threw you under my command on this trip."

"Very well, sir," Ren said, returning the salute. He smiled. Behind his

smile his analytical mind was working rapidly.

"The commander's reactions are not normal," his thoughts said. "They could not be dictated by anything in his past. Therefore they are dictated by something outside him—something on that planet below!" It was a wild conjecture. The more he thought of it the more certain Ren became that there was some intelligence down there that had already made contact with the minds in the ship.

Strangely, this didn't alarm him. He felt that "it" was friendly. He felt that "it" had plumbed the minds of all on board and chosen him to take over and lead the others.

Eagerly he "listened," but no faintest whisper or flavor of thought came to support his feeling of an alien contact. In spite of this he went ahead with his study of things with a confidence that "something" was watching and would see them through all right.

HIS eyes turned again to the image of the cold planet below. That image returned his stare blankly, its inscrutable surface devoid of any hint of mystery.

"I'd suggest we keep circling the planet until I have a chance to form a few definite conclusions," Ren said. "If that can't be done I'd suggest we retreat far enough so we can."

"Yes sir," Commander Dunnam said quietly. He repeated the suggestion in the form of an order to the first mate.

Ren studied the image of the planet. He left the pilot room and wandered over the ship aimlessly. He talked to the members of the crew he ran into.

He slept at his usual time. He ate his meals as usual. He stopped talking to the crew and just wandered about, occasionally going to the pilot room and studying the strange sphere of matter.

After three days he ordered the ship dropped to an orbit about five thousand miles from the surface. Almost as soon as the ship reached its new orbit changes began to be noticed.

Ren had the commander issue an order that every crew member was to report all unusual happenings within the ship. Twenty-four hours later he issued an order that each crew member was to write out a brief report of his movements during the past twenty-four hours as he remembered them.

Ren studied these reports. And gradually he was building up a picture

that was wilder than the wildest of fantastic imaginative creation. He and Commander Dunnham had grown very close to each other. Finally Ren broke his long silence and talked to him about what he was discovering. They were in the dining room. Crew members were eating their "evening" meal. They listened as Ren tried to explain. "I think I've formed a few permanent conclusions about things here," Ren began. "They aren't an EXPLANATION of things, but just a description of the way things are behaving. I'll try to make it clear as I go along."

He chewed his food slowly while trying to think of a good way to begin.

"Take any number, for example," he said. "Take the number five. Back on Earth you can count five apples and say there are five apples. You can count out five eggs and place them in a box, and say there are the same number of eggs as there are apples. There are five of each. Actually that isn't true. There aren't five of either. There is no such thing as the number five. The number is a mental thing, a concept. The apples have a basic property which would more accurately be called a 'fiveness'. The eggs also have a basic property called a 'fiveness', and the fiveness of the eggs and the fiveness of the apples are NOT the same. They are peculiar to each group. The human race invented a concept called the number five, and formulated a theory that all fivenesses belong to a class, called the number five. In nature this theory acted as though it were true. If you have five apples and five eggs you have ten objects. A fiveness placed with another fiveness makes a tenness. So arithmetic merely describes the behavior of a basic property of reality in a consistent manner. Arithmetic is NOT a basic law. It's merely a DESCRIPTION of a basic law.

"That basic doesn't seem to hold where we are now. But there are other basic things that seem to be violated here, too, and will probably be violated even more when and if we land on this planet.

"I've pretty well concluded that number doesn't exist here in the same way it does ordinarily. Take the strength of gravity, for example. Instead of being a single value it is equally a broad range of values, and is all of them at the same time. How that can be I don't know.

"IT'S the same way with the number of objects. Instead of having five

fingers I have three, four, five, six and so on, fingers all at the same time. But my mind can't see that. It can only grasp a single number. My eyes look at my fingers and see the many simultaneous numbers of fingers, but my mind can't grasp that, so it conjures up a single number at random. It RATIONALIZES what it gets, and so we have a real problem—the devising of some method of helping the mind deal with what it can't grasp because it hasn't the equipment to grasp it as it really is.

"There are sixty of us on board—or rather, there WERE sixty. Now there are three, four, and so on, to some number above sixty. The last report handed in by the crew shows eighty-three men on board! I can't prove it, because if I handed you the report sheets you would count more or less than that number.

"So what we must realize is that now there isn't any NUMBER of crew members, but a 'something else' that is different than a number, corresponding to an INTERVAL of numbers. It is real. It's a metaphysical basic for this part of space around this planet.

"It's subtle, too. For example, right now there may be more than one me on this ship, depending on whether there are more than sixty people on board or not. I don't quite understand about that yet. There are a lot of things I don't understand about it. If there is more than one of any person on board, is it a reality, or is it a trick of rationalization of the mind to fit something utterly incomprehensible into at least a semblance of something comprehensible? If it is the latter, then why do the two who are supposedly the same person hand in DIFFERENT reports on what the supposedly one person did, and why do the reports check with other reports?

"I have a theory which might account for part of all this. Our ship and all in it belongs to the universe of the metaphysics we know of and use as the thought process. It is hovering on the borders of a region containing this planet we are to land on—a region operating on other basics. In some way both sets of basics operate in either conflict or compromise. Besides mental confusion there is actual physical confusion.

"But maybe it's better that way. If we make the transition in steps the actual noumenal confusion may guide our minds correctly into a correct understanding of the new basics of this system by the time we land."

Ford Gratrack had come into the dining room unnoticed at the beginning of this. He spoke now.

"Then you claim that the laws of nature are different here than we are accustomed to, and that our minds are not equipped to deal with them?" he asked.

Ren frowned. Not at the words but at something he had not mentioned, about people and identities.

"They are different, yes," Ren returned. "But as to our minds dealing with them—human minds have dealt with things without truly comprehending them since the dawn of time."

"Things that were sane," Ford said.

"These are sane, too," Ren said, studying Ford keenly from hidden eyes. "They're just sane in a different way."

"So is a crazy man," Ford almost sneered openly. "I think we've seen enough to make it obvious we should get away from here while we can."

There was a murmur among the men at the tables that agreed with what Ford had said.

"We may do that," Ren said, ignoring the signs of almost open defiance patent in Ford's tone and manner, and in the men's muttered approval of what he had said. "But we won't until we're sure it's suicide to go down there and land. Don't you realize that we have something here which may be unique in the universe? This space wanderer won't be close enough to the solar system for exploration more than two or three years. Then it will be gone. There may never be another opportunity to study something like it."

"Which is a good thing," Ford snorted. "If you decide to drop the ship any closer to this mad planet you're going to have trouble with the men."

"Meaning you've been talking to them?" Commander Hugh Dunnam asked softly.

"Talking WITH them," Ford Gratrack said, matching Hugh's softness.

"Don't try to put me in the position of being a leader of any rebellion that might develop. I'll confess quite frankly, though, that I want no part of landing on this God-forsaken hunk of matter, and a good many of the crew agree on that. It's suicidal. Frankly, sir, I think you must be under some kind of spell to turn your command over to a spaceman second class as you did."

REN'S scalp crawled. This had been exactly what he himself had felt! So others besides him had "felt" that alien contact from below! On impulse he made up his mind.

"Before anyone says something they might regret later," he cut in, "let me say that I've made up my mind that it's too dangerous to land. The effects we experience up here would probably be increased beyond conception down there. Our thought processes are being affected in ways we can't understand. It's possible that if we landed the ship would behave so differently that it would be impossible to get away. So, give me another two days of study in this orbit and then we'll go back to the solar system."

While Ren was talking he had a curious feeling, far back in the depths of his mind. It was as though a section of the bank of a stream had broken off and dropped into the stream.

Irrational. There had been so many such feelings that crept to the borders of consciousness and faded away without meaning anything. Time! Ren felt that time was all he needed to get to the bottom of it. He compared himself to a newborn babe coming into the world. For the first few months things come and go in meaningless fashion. Slowly the mind makes order out of them. The oft-repeated patterns become clear first, then more obscure ones. Finally the baby is able to understand the apparently senseless sequence of events.

Ren felt that the results would be the same here if he were given half a chance ... but Ford Grattrick was right, too. It concerned more than the mind. It struck at the roots of reality that had been used in the principle of the ship's operation—and there was no way of knowing the ship would operate once it landed.

REN GRAVENARD flicked the ashes from the end of his cigarette off the edge of the table onto the floor. Martha's eyes took this in and slowly lost their faraway look.

"I'm trying to make clear, Martha," Ren said gravely, "the emergence into consciousness of the things going on around us. There was no way yet for us to suspect their full activity—their inroads. Things were going on that we simply could not see or sense in any way because we didn't yet have the faculty of grasping them. They made their impression and were lost in a hodge-podge of neural channels

already deeply grooved in the normal way, so that when they got close enough to the conscious mind to be sensed, they were distorted beyond any semblance of the true reality."

"I can see that," Martha said, her eyes brooding. "But DID you find a living, intelligent creature or race on Metapor?"

Ren nodded. "I'm coming to that later," he said. "Be patient and let me take things in order. That's the only way you can understand when I tell you about—her."

His eyes studied the glowing coal at the end of the cigarette. He lifted the white cylinder to his lips and sucked in. Dropping the cigarette on the floor and stepping on it, he let the grey smoke seep from his mouth and nostrils.

Traffic sounds came through the window. A murmur of voices drifted over the two as they sat there, quietly.

"I've tried to bring you up to the point where I began to suspect," Ren continued. "I described the feeling I had that was something like watching a large chunk of the bank of a stream break away, starting first as a jagged crack in the turf, with it widening slowly at first, then faster, until the broken chunk becomes a separate THING, dissociated from the bank. It breaks away, drops into the stream—and vanishes; while the bank itself remains, enclosing and containing the rushing stream.

"I didn't realize then what that feeling meant. I had felt it in varied shades before. It rose almost into consciousness, then, like the broken section of the bank itself, it would drop away and dissolve in the swirling stream of mind.

"Sitting there at the table in the ship's dining room, suddenly I suspected what that feeling really sprung from. I got my first inkling of what intervalness instead of numberness really meant.

"For an insane period I was two people, both the same person and yet not a person—and even not two, or even one, but a 'something' that contained in the logical sense all of those, as a class contains the members of the class.

"Remember that I said I was making a little speech, sitting there, that assured Ford Grattrick and the members of the crew present in the room that we weren't going to risk landing, but get away in a couple of days.

"At the same time, while I was talking, I was experiencing this strange

feeling. It was quite clear, for a few seconds. I was two Ren Gravenards, saying two different things. The two of me were very close. But while I talked they separated distinctly as the bank of the stream and the chunk are suddenly not one, but two.

"It was not me alone. Every man in that room was doing the same. The ship itself was doing it—and suddenly ..."

"BEFORE anyone says something they might regret," Hugh Dunnam, the commander, said in a quiet warning voice, "get this straight, all of you. This is a government ship. I'm an officer of the Earth Space Fleet and my command is law. I have a right temporarily to promote any member of my crew to complete command of the ship with power equal to mine or even greater than mine. If Ren Gravenard says we go down, we go down even if it seems certain we'll all be killed. You have a choice of certain but honorable death, and equally certain but dishonorable death. Or you have a choice between an uncertain but honorable death if death it is, and certain but dishonorable death as a coward and a traitor. Let's not have any more thoughts of insubordination. You, Ford Grattrick, under a stricter commander, would already be on the way to the brig."

Ford looked at Hugh Dunnam through slitted eyes, his face expressionless. Suddenly he smiled.

"You forget, sir," he said smoothly. "Under a less human commander I would have kept my thoughts to myself."

"I WAS sitting there, Martha," Ren said. "Trying to grab hold of the strange 'split' in things. It's even more mixed up than I pictured it. I had a feeling of BEING both Hugh Dunnam and myself, and also of being myself on a 'something' drifting apart from all I could see. At the same time there was a feeling of two separate things now existing on the ship. Those two things might be called a composite of each of the two forces that began their existence at that moment—the forces obedient to the commander, and me; and the forces that were to side in with Ford Grattrick."

"In a way numberness in any group depends on the independent unity of each member of the group. Put a thousand drops of water in a glass and you don't have a thousand drops of water but a teaspoon or so of water. It would be impossible to take a drop of water out and

definitely say that it was one of the drops you had put in. And if you changed all the water back into drops you might have more or less than the thousand you put in.

"But water is a fluid. A human being is not. In some inexplicable way, however, I was becoming more and more like the drop of water after it is dropped into a large volume of water. I was 'spreading', while all the time seeming to be just my normal self.

"I think I was beginning dimly to see the new metaphysical basics that were to make the whole thing sensible and manipulable. At least, I had already realized that it was different than would be, for example, the difference in operational principle of a gas engine and an electric transformer.

"If you've ever studied any abstract mathematical system you'll be able to understand how the changing of one basic axiom can alter the whole structure almost beyond recognition. Suppose that change in a basic axiom were not a clean change, but that for a time both the axiom and its alternative were to be used interchangeably and unpredictably. You would have results that were double-valued. You would have contradictory results following from whatever you began with until the old axiom got weeded out entirely.

"Perhaps you can see that well enough to understand everything. I hope so, Martha. If you can I can skip the landing. We DID land. We crashed, and we landed safely. We also did something else. I think that when they check the records they'll find that the Endore also came back to Earth and reported that it hadn't actually landed on Metapor. It did all those things—returned over a year ago, landed safely, and was crushed in landing. If you could see HOW it could do all those things—it's like the page in a book; you pass it if you look for it, and find it if you don't look for it.

"It's happening here on Earth right now and will keep on happening until the old basics that contradict the new ones are no longer operating. You see, Martha, we knew that would happen. That's why we came back. The new system is so much more perfect than the old. SHE taught it to us when we landed. Ford Gratrix and his fellow objectors were killed in the ship that crashed. They also were on the ship that came back to Earth. They're alive and they're dead." Martha's face was a mask of confusion. She was trying to understand and not knowing how. Ren saw this and tried again.

"Suppose we try from this angle," he said patiently. "If a car is going ten miles an hour it will be ten miles farther on at the end of an hour. If it goes twenty miles an hour it will be twenty miles farther on. But suppose it goes both ten miles an hour and twenty miles an hour. At the end of an hour it will be ten miles and twenty miles along, and according to what the Earth is used to it would have to become two cars to do that.

"If it went every speed from zero to twenty miles an hour it would have to become an infinite number of cars, and occupy every position from the starting point to a twenty-mile distance at the end of an hour. That would be the conventional conclusion to the abstract problems. With the new basics it does just that—except that it is still just one car, and yet never was just one car and never will be. It CAN'T be, because there is no such thing, in the new system, as a one thing.

"I myself am not Ren Gravenard, only Ren Gravenard, or anything else that your old ideas can conceive of. You'll see, Martha. The whole world will see soon, just as I did after we had been on Metapor a short while and had gotten the contradictions out of my mind and my structure."

"Then what are you?" Martha asked tensely.

"I'm the crew of the Endore," Ren said softly. "I'm Ren Gravenard here and now because that is the only thing you can accept at present. I'm—Her, the incomprehensible."

A question rose in Martha's mind. She drew back from the question as from the brink of the Abyss, yet felt drawn magnetically toward it. Ren watched and knew what that question would be. She opened her lips.

"Who—am I?" she asked.

"Look at your hands," Ren said.

Martha looked down at her hands resting on the edge of the table.

They were large, gnarled, strong—the hands of a man. She flexed them. They were smooth and skillful.

Wonderingly she raised her eyes to look at her companion across the table. Her companion was—herself and she was Ren Gravenard.

Anything else would have been—unthinkable.

THE END

FOOTNOTES:

[1]In 2027 A.D., just seventy-five years after the first space flight, a dangerous disease was brought to Earth which wiped out almost a

million lives before a cure was found. Immediately an elaborate quarantine procedure was developed to take care of any possible eventuality. This also included the psych screening routine to check on the sanity and normalcy of returning space crews.

One feature of emergency quarantine was the creation of the spaceport zone, an area with a radius of fifty miles about the spaceport, which during quarantine was to be blocked off with nothing permitted to go either in or out.

For all-out quarantine as in this present case, a temporary planet quarantine was to be imposed, preventing the landing or taking off of any space ship at all.

Other measures would take effect if and when they became necessary, such as national quarantine, continent quarantine, and even harsh measures if they became necessary.—Ed.

Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from Amazing Stories April 1949. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note. Variant spellings have been retained.

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The Troubadour

By Peter Michael
Sherman

*There was something odd about
the guest attraction, Mr.
Fayliss, and something
odder still about
his songs.*

SO FAR as parties go, Jocelyn's were no duller than any others. I went to this one mainly to listen to Paul Kutrov and Frank Alva bait each other, which is usually more entertaining than most double features. Kutrov adheres to the "onward and upward" school of linear progress, while Alva is more or less of a Spenglerian. More when he goes along by himself; less when you try to pin him down to it. And since the subject of tonight's revelations would be the pre-Mohammed Arabian Culture, I'd find Alva inclined toward my side of the debate, which is strictly morphological and without any pious theories of "progress".

I'd completely forgotten that Jocelyn had mentioned something about having a special attraction: a "Mr. Fayliss", who, she insisted, was a troubadour. I didn't comment, not wanting to spend a day with Jocelyn on the phone, exploring the Provence.

The night wasn't too warm for August, and there were occasional gusts of air seeping through the layers of tobacco smoke that hovered over the assemblage. As usual, it was a heterogeneous crowd, which rapidly formed numerous islands of discourse. The trade winds carried salient gems of intelligence throughout the entire archipelago at times, and Jocelyn walked upon the water, scurrying from one body to another, sopping up the overflow of "culture". She visited our atoll, where Kutrov's passionate exposition had already raised the mean

temperature some degrees, but didn't stay long. Such debates didn't suggest any course of social or political action, and couldn't be trued in to any of her causes.

My attention was wandering from the Kutrov-Alva variations, for Bill had only been speaking for ten minutes, and could not be expected to arrive at any point whatsoever for at least another fifteen. From the east of us came apocalyptic figures of nuclear physics; from the west, I heard the strains of Mondrian interwoven with Picasso; south of us, a post mortem on the latest "betrayal" of this or that aspiration of "the people", and to the north, we heard the mysteries of atonality. It was while I was looking around, and letting these things roll over me, that I saw the stranger enter. Jocelyn immediately bounced up from a couch, leaving the crucial problem of atmosphere-poisoning via fission and/or fusion bombs suspended, and made effusive noises.

This, then, was the "troubadour"—Mr. Fayliss. The Main Attraction was decidedly prepossessing. Tall, peculiarly graceful both in appearance and manner, dressed with an immaculateness that seemed excessive in this post-Bohemian circle. There was a decided musical quality to his speech, as he made polite comments upon being introduced to each of us, and an exactness in sentence-structure, word-choices and enunciation that bespoke the foreigner. Jocelyn took him around with the air of conducting a quick tour through a museum, then settled him momentarily with the music group, now in darkest Schoenberg, only partially illuminated by "Wozzek". I watched Fayliss long enough to solidify an impression that he was at ease here—but not merely in this particular discussion. It was a case of his being simply at ease, period.

Kutrov was watching him, too, and I saw now that there would be a most-likely permanent digression. Too bad—I'd had a feeling that when he came to his point, it would have been a strong one.

"Hungarian, do you suppose?" he asked.

Alva examined the evidence. Fayliss had high cheekbones, longish eyes, with large pupils. He was lean, without giving an impression of thinness. He had not taken off his gloves, and I wondered if he would come forth with a monocle; if he had, it would not have seemed an affectation.

"I wouldn't say Slavic," Alva said. He started off on ethnology, and we toured the Near East again. I jumped into the break when Kutrov was

swallowing beer and Alva lighting a cigaret to observe that Fayliss reminded me of some Egyptian portraits—although I couldn't set the period. "If those eyes of his don't shine in the dark," I added, "they ought to."

A BRIEF pause for appreciation, then Jocelyn was calling for all men's attention. She managed to get it in reasonably short order, took a deep breath, then dived into announcing that our "special guest, Mr. Fayliss" was going to deliver a song-cycle.

Fayliss arose, bowed slightly, then nodded to Mark Loring, who brought forth his oboe. "These songs were not conceived or composed in the form I am presenting them," he said. "But I believe that the arrangement I use is an effective one.

"I call this, 'Song of the Last Men'." He nodded again to Loring, and the performance began. His voice was affecting, and his artistry unmistakable. And there were overtones in his voice that gave an added eeriness to the weird music itself.

The songs told of the feelings, the memories, and despair of a nearly-extinct people—one which had achieved a great culture and a world-wide civilization. The singer knows that the civilization has been destroyed; that the people created by this culture and civilization are gone, the few survivors being pitiful fellaheen, unable to rebuild or bring forth a culture of their own. There is despair at the loss of the comforts the civilization they knew brought them, sorrow at their inability to share in its greatness—even in memory; and a resigned certainty that they are the last of the race—they will soon be gone, and no others shall arise after them.

There was silence when Fayliss finished, then discreet but firm applause, as if the audience felt that giving full reign to their approval would make an impious racket. Fayliss seemed to sense this feeling, and smiled as he bowed.

"These are not songs of your people, are they?" asked Jocelyn. Fayliss shook his head. "Oh no—they are far removed from us. I am merely an explorer of past cultures and civilizations, and I enjoy adapting such masterpieces of the past as I can find. This arrangement was made for you; I shall make a different one for my own people, so that the sonic values of the music and the words agree with each other."

Kutrov blinked, then asked him—"Well, can you tell us something more about the people who created this cycle? It has a familiar ring to it, yet I cannot tie it in with any past culture I have heard of."

Jocelyn cut in with the regretful announcement that Mr. Fayliss had another appointment, and called for a note of thanks to him for coming. More applause—this time unrestrained. Fayliss smiled again and swept his eyes around us, as if filled with some amusing secret. Then he said to Kutrov, "You would find them quite understandable."

I wandered over to the window, in search of air, and noted that someone had indiscreetly left a comfortable chair vacant. I was near the door, so that I could hear Jocelyn say to Fayliss: "It was—very moving. Why, I could almost feel that you were singing about us." Fayliss smiled again. "That is as it should be."

"Of course," chimed in Loring, who'd come up to ask Fayliss if he could have a copy of the score, "that's the test of expert performance." The lights were dimmed again by the fog of tobacco smoke, and I could see the street quite clearly by moonlight. I decided I would watch Fayliss, and see if his eyes did glow in the dark. I saw him go down the sidewalk, with that graceful stride of his, his hands in his pockets. But I couldn't see his eyes at all.

Then a gust of wind tugged his hat, and, for an instant I thought he'd have to go scrambling after it. But, quick as a rapier thrust, a tail darted out from beneath his dress coat, caught the hat, and set it back upon his head.

Transcriber's Note:

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BACKLASH

By WINSTON MARKS

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I still feel that the ingratiating little runts never intended any harm. They were eager to please, a cinch to transact business with, and constantly, everlastingly grateful to us for giving them asylum. Yes, we gave the genuflecting little devils asylum. And we were glad to have them around at first—especially when they presented our women with a gift to surpass all gifts: a custom-built domestic servant. In a civilization that had made such a fetish of personal liberty and dignity, you couldn't hire a butler or an upstairs maid for less than love and money. And since love was pretty much rationed along the lines of monogamy, domestic service was almost a dead occupation. That is, until the Ollies came to our planet to stay. Eventually I learned to despise the spineless little immigrants from Sirius, but the first time I met one he made me feel foolishly important. I looked at his frail, olive-skinned little form, and thought, If this is what space has to offer in the way of advanced life-forms ... well, we haven't done so badly on old Mother Earth.

This one's name was Johnson. All of them, the whole fifty-six, took the commonest Earth family names they could find, and dropped their own name-designations whose slobbering sibilance made them difficult for us to pronounce and write. It seemed strange, their casually wiping out their nominal heritage just for the sake of our convenience—imagine an O'Toole or a Rockefeller or an Adams arriving on Sirius IV and no sooner learning the local lingo than insisting on becoming known as Sslyslasciff-sosz!

But that was the Ollie. Anything to get along and please us. And of course, addressing them as Johnson, Smith, Jones, etc., did work something of a semantic protective coloration and reduce some of the barriers to quick adjustment to the aliens.

Johnson—Ollie Johnson—appeared at my third under-level office a few months after the big news of their shipwreck landing off the Maine coast. He arrived a full fifteen minutes ahead of his appointment, and I was too curious to stand on the dignity of office routine and make him wait.

As he stood in the doorway of my office, my first visual impression was of an emaciated adolescent, seasick green, prematurely balding. He bowed, and bowed again, and spent thirty seconds reminding me that it was he who had sought the interview, and it was he who had the big favors to ask—and it was wonderful, gracious, generous I who flavored the room with the essence of mystery, importance, godliness and overpowering sweetness upon whose fragrance little Ollie Johnson had come to feast his undeserving senses.

"Sit down, sit down," I told him when I had soaked in all the celestial flattery I could hold. "I love you to pieces, too, but I'm curious about this proposition you mentioned in your message."

He eased into the chair as if it were much too good for him. He was strictly humanoid. His four-and-a-half-foot body was dressed in the most conservative Earth clothing, quiet colors and cheap quality. While he swallowed slowly a dozen times, getting ready to outrage my illustrious being with his sordid business proposition, his coloring varied from a rather insipid gray-green to a rich olive—which is why the press instantly had dubbed them Ollies. When they got excited and blushed, they came close to the color of a ripe olive; and this was often.

Ollie Johnson hissed a few times, his equivalent of throat-clearing, and then lunged into his subject at a 90 degree tangent:

"Can it be that your gracious agreement to this interview connotes a willingness to traffic with us of the inferior ones?" His voice was light, almost reedy.

"If it's legal and there's a buck in it, can't see any reason why not," I told him.

"You manufacture and distribute devices, I am told. Wonderful labor-saving mechanisms that make life on Earth a constant pleasure."

I was almost tempted to hire him for my public relations staff.

"We do," I admitted. "Servo-mechanisms, appliances and gadgets of

many kinds for the home, office and industry."

"It is to our everlasting disgrace," he said with humility, "that we were unable to salvage the means to give your magnificent civilization the worthy gift of our space drive. Had Flussissc or Shascinsith survived our long journey, it would be possible, but—" He bowed his head, as if waiting for my wrath at the stale news that the only two power-mechanic scientists on board were D.O.A.

"That was tough," I said. "But what's on your mind now?"

He raised his moist eyes, grateful at my forgiveness. "We who survived do possess a skill that might help repay the debt which we have incurred in intruding upon your glorious planet."

He begged my permission to show me something in the outer waiting room. With more than casual interest, I assented.

He moved obsequiously to the door, opened it and spoke to someone beyond my range of vision. His words sounded like a repetition of "sissle-flissle." Then he stepped aside, fastened his little wet eyes on me expectantly, and waited.

Suddenly the doorway was filled, jamb to jamb, floor to arch, with a hulking, bald-headed character with rugged pink features, a broad nose like a pug, and huge sugar-scoops for ears. He wore a quiet business suit of fine quality, obviously tailored to his six-and-a-half-foot, cliff-like physique. In spite of his bulk, he moved across the carpet to my desk on cat feet, and came to a halt with pneumatic smoothness.

"I am a Soth," he said in a low, creamy voice. It was so resonant that it seemed to come from the walls around us. "I have learned your language and your ways. I can follow instructions, solve simple problems and do your work. I am very strong. I can serve you well."

The recitation was an expressionless monotone that sounded almost haughty compared to the self-effacing Ollie's piping whines. His face had the dignity of a rock, and his eyes the quiet peace of a cool, deep mountain lake.

The Ollie came forward. "We have been able to repair only one of the six Soths we had on the ship. They are more fragile than we humanoids."

"They don't look it," I said. "And what do you mean

by you humanoids? What's he?"

"You would call him—a robot, I believe."

My astonished reaction must have satisfied the Ollie, because he allowed his eyes to leave me and seek the carpet again, where they evidently were more comfortable.

"You mean you—you make these people?" I gasped.

He nodded. "We can reproduce them, given materials and facilities. Of course, your own robots must be vastly superior—" a hypocritical sop to my vanity—"but still we hope you may find a use for the Soths." I got up and walked around the big lunker, trying to look blasé. "Well, yes," I lied. "Our robots probably have considerably better intellectual abilities—our cybernetic units, that is. However, you do have something in form and mobility."

That was the understatement of my career.

I finally pulled my face together, and said as casually as I could,

"Would you like to license us to manufacture these—Soths?"

The Ollie fluttered his hands. "But that would require our working and mingling with your personnel," he said. "We wouldn't consider imposing in such a gross manner."

"No imposition at all," I assured him.

But he would have none of it: "We have studied your economics and have found that your firm is an outstanding leader in what you term 'business.' You have a superb distribution organization. It is our intention to offer you the exclusive—" he hesitated, then dragged the word from his amazing vocabulary—"franchise for the sale of our Soths. If you agree, we will not burden you with their manufacture. Our own little plant will produce and ship. You may then place them with your customers."

I studied the magnificent piece of animated sculpturing, stunned at the possibilities. "You say a Soth is strong. How strong?"

The huge creature startled me by answering the question himself. He bent flowingly from the waist, gripped my massive steel desk by one of its thick, overlapping top edges, and raised it a few inches from the floor—with the fingers of one hand. When he put it down, I stood up and hefted one edge myself. By throwing my back into it, I could just budge one side of the clumsy thing—four hundred pounds if it was an ounce!

Ollie Johnson modestly refrained from comment. He said, "The Department of Commerce has been helpful. They have explained your medium of exchange, and have helped us with the prices of raw materials. It was they who recommended your firm as a likely distributor."

"Have you figured how much one of these Soths should sell for?"

"We think we can show a modest profit if we sell them to you for \$1200," he said. "Perhaps we can bring down our costs, if you find a wide enough demand for them."

I had expected ten or twenty times that figure. I'm afraid I got a little eager. "I—uh—shall we see if we can't just work out a little contract right now? Save you another trip back this afternoon."

"If you will forgive our boorish presumption," Ollie said, fumbling self-consciously in his baggy clothing, "I have already prepared such a document with the help of the Attorney General. A very kindly gentleman."

It was simple and concise. It allowed us to resell the Soths at a price of \$2000, Fair Traded, giving us a gross margin of \$800 to work with. He assured me that upkeep and repairs on the robot units were negligible, and we could extend a very generous warranty which the Ollies would make good in the event of failure. He gave me a quick rundown on the care and feeding of a Sirian Soth, and then jolted me with:

"There is just a single other favor I beg of you. Would you do my little colony the exquisite honor of accepting this Soth as your personal servant, Mr. Collins?"

"Servant?"

He bobbed his head. "Yes, sir. We have trained him in the rudiments of the household duties and conventions of your culture. He learns rapidly and never forgets an instruction. Your wife would find Soth most useful, I am quite certain."

"A magnificent specimen like this doing housework?" I marveled at the little creature's empty-headedness.

"Again I must beg your pardon, sir. I overlooked mentioning a suggestion by the Secretary of Labor that the Soths be sold only for use in domestic service. It was also the consensus of the President's whole cabinet that the economy of any nation could not cope with the

problem of unemployment were our Soths to be made available for all the types of work for which they are fitted."

My dream of empire collapsed. The little green fellow was undoubtedly telling the truth. The unions would strike any plant or facility in the world where a Soth put foot on the job. It would ruin our retail consumer business, too—Soths wouldn't consume automobiles, copters, theater tickets and filets mignon.

"Yes, Mr. Johnson," I sighed. "I'll be happy to try out your Soth. We have a place out in the country where he'll come in handy."

The Ollie duly expressed his ecstasy at my decision, and backed out of my office waving his copy of the contract. I had assured him that our board of directors would meet within a week and confirm my signature.

I looked up at the hairless giant. As general director of the Home Appliance Division of Worldwide Machines, Incorporated, I had made a deal, all right. The first interplanetary business deal in history. But for some reason, I couldn't escape the feeling that I'd been had.

On the limoucopter, they charged me double fare for Soth's transportation to the private field where I kept my boat. As we left Detroit, I watched him stare down at the flattened skyline, but he did it with the unseeing expression of an old commuter.

Jack, my personal pilot, had eyed my passenger at the airport with some concern and sullen muttering. Now he made much of trimming ship after takeoff. The boat did seem logy with the unaccustomed ballast—it was a four-passenger Arrow, built for speed, and Soth had to crouch and spread all over the two rear seats. But he did so without complaint or comment for the half-hour hop up to our estate on my favorite Canadian lake.

As the four hundred miles unreeled below us, I wondered how Vicki would react to Soth. I should have phoned her, but how do you describe a Soth to a semi-invalid whose principal excitement is restricted to bird-watching and repotting puny geraniums, and a rare sunfishing expedition to the end of our floating pier?

Well, it was Friday, and I would have the whole weekend to work the robot into our routine. I had called my friend, Dr. Frederick Hilliard, a retired industrial psychologist, and invited him to drop over tonight if he wanted an interesting surprise. He was our nearest neighbor and

my most frequent chess partner, who lived a secluded bachelor's life in a comfortable cabin on the far shore of our lake.

As we came in for a water landing, I saw Fred's boat at our pier. Then I could make out Fred, Vicki and Clumsy, our Irish setter, all waiting for me. I hoped Fred's presence would help simmer Vicki down a little.

We drifted in to the dock, and I turned to Soth and told him to help my pilot unload the supplies. This pleased Jack, whose Pilot and Chauffeur's Local frequently reminded me in polite little bulletins that its members were not obligated to perform other than technical services for their employers.

Then I got out and said hello to Vicki and Fred as casually as possible. Vicki kissed me warmly on the mouth, which she does when she's excited, and then clung to me and let the day's tension soak out of her.

How you get tense in a Twenty-first Century home in the midst of the Canadian wilderness is something I've never been able to figure out, but Vicki's super-imagination managed daily to defeat her doctor's orders for peace and quiet.

"I'm glad you're home, dear," she said. "When Fred came over ahead of time I knew something was up, and I'm all unraveled with curiosity." Just then Soth emerged from the boat with our whole week's supply of foodstuffs and assorted necessities bundled under his long arms.

"Oh, dear God, a dinner guest!" Vicki exclaimed. Tears started into her reproachful eyes and her slender little figure stiffened in my arms.

I swung her around, hooked arms with her and Fred, and started up the path.

"Not a guest," I told her. "He's a servant who will make the beds, clean up and all sorts of things, and if you don't like him we'll turn him in on a new model laundry unit, and don't start worrying about being alone with him—he's a robot."

"A robot!" Fred said, and both their heads swiveled to stare back.

"Yes," I said. "That's why I wanted you here tonight, Fred. I'd like to have you sort of go over him and—well, you know—"

I didn't want to say, make sure he's safe. Not in Vicki's presence. But Fred caught my eye and nodded.

I started to tell them of my visitor, and the contract with the castaways from space. Halfway through, Clumsy interrupted me with his excited

barking. I looked back. Clumsy was galloping a frantic circle around Soth, cutting in and out, threatening to make an early dinner of the intruder's leg.

Before I could speak, Soth opened his lips and let out a soft hiss through his white teeth. Clumsy flattened to the ground and froze, and Soth continued after us without a further glance at the dog.

Fred looked at Vicki's tense face and laughed. "I'll have to learn that trick ... Clumsy's chewed the cuffs off three pairs of my best slacks."

Vicki smiled uncertainly, and went into the house. I showed Soth where to stow the supplies, and told him to remain in the kitchen. He just froze where he stood.

Fred was making drinks when I returned to the living room.

"Looks docile enough, Cliff," he told me.

"Strong as a horse and gentle as a lamb," I said. "I want you two to help me find out what his talents are. I'll have to prepare a paper on him for the board of directors Monday."

There were nervous whitecaps on Vicki's drink.

I patted her shoulder. "I'll break him into the housekeeping routine, honey. You won't have him staring over your shoulder."

She tried to relax. "But he's so quiet—and big!"

"Who wants a noisy little servant around?" Fred said helpfully. "And how about that rock retaining-wall Cliff is always about to build for your garden? And you really don't love housework, do you, Vicki?"

"I don't mind the chores," she said. "But it might be fun to have a big fellow like that to shove around." She was trying valiantly to hold up her end, but the vein in her temple was throbbing.

Well, the next forty-eight hours were more than interesting. Soth turned out to be what the doctor ordered, literally and figuratively. After I'd taken him on a tour of the place, I showed him how to work the automatic devices—food preparation, laundry and cleaning. And after one lesson, he served us faultless meals with a quiet efficiency that was actually restful, even miraculously to Vicki.

She began relaxing in his presence and planning a few outside projects "to get our money's worth" out of the behemoth. This was our earliest joke about Soth, because he certainly was no expense or problem to maintain. As the Ollie had promised, he thrived on our table scraps and a pink concoction which he mixed by pouring a few

drops of purple liquid from a pocket vial into a gallon pitcher of water. The stuff would be supplied by the Ollies at a cost of about a dollar eighty a week.

Saturday afternoon, Vicki bravely took over teaching him the amenities of butlering and the intricacies of bed-making. After a short session in the bedroom, she came out looking thoughtful.

"He's awfully real looking," she said. "And you can't read a darned thing in his eyes. How far can you trust him, Cliff? You know—around women?"

Fred looked at me with a raised eyebrow and said, "Well, let's find out."

We sat down and called Soth into the living room. He came and stood before us, erect, poised and motionless.

Fred said, "Disrobe. Remove all your clothing. Strip!"

Vicki sucked in her breath.

The Soth replied instantly, "Your order conflicts with my conditioning. I must not remove my covering in the presence of an Earthwoman."

Fred scratched his gray temple thoughtfully. "Then, Vicki, would you mind disrobing, please?"

She gulped again. Fred was an old friend, but not exactly the family doctor.

He sensed her mild outrage. "You'll never stop wondering if you don't," he said.

She looked at Fred, me, and then Soth. Then she stood up gingerly, as if edging into a cold shower, gritted her teeth, grasped the catch to her full-length zipper of her blue lounging suit and stripped it from armpit to ankle. As she stepped out of it, I saw why she had peeled it off like you would a piece of adhesive tape: It was a warm day, and she wore no undergarments.

Soth moved so softly I didn't hear him go, but Fred was watching him—Fred's eyes were where they belonged. Soth stopped in the archway to the dining room with his back turned. Fred was at his side.

"Why did you leave?" Fred demanded.

"I am not permitted to remain in the company of an uncovered Earthwoman ... unless she directs me to do so."

While Vicki fled behind the French door to dress herself, Fred asked, "Are there any other restrictions to your behavior in the presence of

Earthwomen?"

"Many."

"Recount some of them."

"An Earthwoman may not be touched, regardless of her wishes, unless danger to her life requires it."

"Looks like you wash your own back, Vicki," I chuckled.

"What else?" she asked, poking her head out. "I mean what other things can't you do?"

"There are many words I may not utter, postures I may not assume, and certain duties I may not perform. Certain answers to questions may not be given in the presence of an Earthwoman."

Fred whistled. "The Ollies have mastered more than our language ... I thought you said they were noted mainly for their linguistic talents, Cliff."

I was surprised, too. In the space of a few hectic months our alien visitors had probed deeply into our culture, mores and taboos—and then had had the genius to instill their compounded discretions into their Soths.

I said, "Satisfied, Vicki?"

She was still arranging herself. Her lips curled up at the corners impishly. "I'm almost disappointed," she said. "I do an all-out striptease, and no one looks but my husband. Of course," she added thoughtfully, "I suppose that's something...."

Fred stayed with us until Sunday evening. I went down to the pier to smoke a good-night pipe with him, and get his private opinion.

"I'm buying a hundred shares of Worldwide stock tomorrow," he declared. "That critter is worth his weight in diamonds to every well-heeled housewife in the country. In fact, put me down for one of your first models. I wouldn't mind having a laundry sorter and morning coffee-pourer, myself."

"Think he's safe, do you?"

"No more emotions than that stump over there. And it baffles me. He has self-awareness, pain-sensitivity and a fantastic vocabulary, yet I needled him all afternoon with every semantic hypo I could think of without getting a flicker of emotion out of him." He paused.

"Incidentally, I made him strip for me in my room. You'll be as confused as I was to learn that he's every inch a man in his format."

"What?" I exclaimed.

"Made me wonder what his duties included back on his home planet ... but as I said, no emotions. With the set of built-in inhibitions he has, he'd beat a eunuch out of his job any day of the week."

A few seconds later, Fred dropped into his little two-seater and skimmed off for home, leaving me with a rather disturbing question in my mind.

I went back to the house and cornered Soth out in the kitchen alone. Vicki had him polishing all the antique silverware.

"Are there female Soths?" I asked point-blank.

He looked down at me with that relaxed, pink look and said, "No, Mr. Collins," and went back to his polishing.

The damned liar. He knew what I meant. He justified himself on a technicality.

I left Vicki Monday morning with more confidence than I'd had in ages. She had slept especially well, and the only thing on her mind was Clumsy's disappearance. He hadn't shown up since Soth scared the fleas off him with that hiss.

At the office, I had my girl transcribe my notes and work up a memorandum to the board of directors. We sent it around before noon, and shortly after lunch I had calls from all ten of them, including the chairman. It was not that they considered it such a big thing—they were just plainly curious. We scheduled a meeting for Tuesday morning, to talk the thing over.

That night when I got home, all was serene. Soth served us cocktails, dinner and a late snack, and had the place tidied up by bedtime. He did all this and managed to remain virtually invisible. He moved so quietly and with such uncanny anticipation of our demands, it was if he were an old family retainer, long versed in our habits and customs. Vicki bragged as she undressed that she had the giant hog-tied and jumping through hoops.

"We even got half the excavation done for the rock wall," she said proudly.

On impulse, I went out into the hall and down to Soth's room, where I found him stretched out slaunchwise across the double bed.

He opened his eyes as I came in, but didn't stir.

"Are you happy here?" I asked bluntly.

He sat up and did something new. He answered my question with a question. "Are you happy with my services?"

I said, "Yes, of course."

"Then all is well," he replied simply, and lay down again.

It seemed like a satisfactory answer. He radiated a feeling of peace, and the expression of repose on his heavy features was assuring.

It rained hard and cold during the night. I hadn't shown Soth how to start the automatic heating unit. When I left the house next morning, he was bringing Vicki her breakfast in bed, a tray on one arm and a handful of kindling under the other. Only once had he watched me build a fire in the fireplace, but he proceeded with confidence.

We flew blind through filthy weather all the way to Detroit. I dismissed Jack with orders to return at eleven with Soth.

"Don't be late," I warned him.

Jack looked a little uneasy, but he showed up on schedule and delivered Soth to us with rain droplets on his massive bald pate, just ten minutes after the conference convened.

I had Ollie Johnson there, too, to put Soth through his paces. The Ollie, in a bedraggled, soggy suit, was so excited that he remained an almost purplish black for the whole hour.

The directors were charmed, impressed and enthusiastic.

When I finished my personal report on the Soth's tremendous success in my own household, old Gulbrandson, Chairman of the Board, shined his rosy cheeks with his handkerchief and said, "I'll take the first three you produce, Johnson. Our staff of domestics costs me more than a brace of attorneys, and it turns over about three times a year. Cook can't even set the timer on the egg-cooker right." He turned to me. "Sure he can make good coffee, Collins?"

I nodded emphatically.

"Then put me down for three for sure," he said with executive finality. Gulbrandson paid dearly for his piggishness later, but at the time it seemed only natural that if one Soth could run a household efficiently, then the Chairman of the Board should have at least two spares in case one blew a fuse or a vesicle or whatever it was they might blow.

A small, dignified riot almost broke up the meeting right there, and when they quieted down again I had orders for twenty-six Soths from

the board members and one from my own secretary.

"How soon," I asked Ollie Johnson, "can you begin deliveries?"

He dry-washed his hands and admitted it would be five months, and a sigh of disappointment ran around the table. Then someone asked him how many units a month they could turn out.

He stared at the carpet and held out his hands like a pawn-broker disparaging a diamond ring: "Our techniques are so slow. The first month, maybe a hundred. Of course, once our cultures are all producing in harmony, almost any number. One thousand? Ten thousand? Whatever your needs suggest."

One of the officers asked, "Is your process entirely biological? You mentioned cultures."

For a moment, I thought Ollie Johnson was going to break out in tears. His face twisted.

"Abysmally so," he grieved. "Our synthetic models have never proved durable. Upkeep and parts replacements are prohibitive. Our brain units are much similar to your own latest developments in positronics, but we have had to resort to organic cellular structure in order to achieve the mobility which Mr. Collins admired last Friday."

The upshot of the meeting was a hearty endorsement over my signature on the Ollies' contract, plus an offer of any help they might need to get production rolling.

As the meeting broke up, they pumped my hand and stared enviously at my Soth. Several offered me large sums for him, up to fifteen thousand dollars, and for the moment I sweated out the rack of owning something my bosses did not. Their understandable resentment, however, was tempered by their recognition of my genius in getting a signed contract before the Ollies went shopping to our competitors.

What none of us understood right then was that the Ollies were hiring us, not the other way around.

When I told Vicki about my hour of triumph and how the officers bid up our Soth, she glowed with the very feminine delight of exclusive possession. She hugged me and gloated, "Old biddy Gulbrandson—won't she writhe? And don't you dare take any offer for our Soth. He's one of the family now, eh, Soth, old boy?"

He was serving soup to her as she slapped him on the hip. Somehow he managed to retreat so fast she almost missed him, yet he didn't

spill a drop of bouillon from the poised tureen.

"Yes, Mrs. Collins," he said, not a trace more nor less aloof than usual.

"Oops, sorry!" Vicki apologized. "I forgot. The code."

I had the feeling that warm-hearted Vicki would have had the Soth down on the bearskin rug in front of the big fireplace, scuffling him like she did Clumsy, if it hadn't been for the Soth's untouchable code—and I was thankful that it existed. Vicki had a way of putting her hand on you when she spoke, or hugging anyone in sight when she was especially delighted.

And I knew something about Soth that she didn't. Something that apparently hadn't bothered her mind since the day of her striptease.

Summer was gone and it was mid-fall before Ollie paid me another visit. When he showed up again, it was with an invoice for 86 Soths, listed by serial numbers and ready to ship. He had heard about sight drafts and wanted me to help him prepare one.

"To hell with that noise," I told him. I wrote a note to purchasing and countersigned the Ollie's invoice for some \$103,000. I called my secretary and told her to take Ollie and his bill down to disbursing and have him paid off.

I had to duck behind my desk before the Ollie dreamed up some new obscenity of gratitude to heap on me. Then I cleared shipping instructions through sales for the Soths already on order and dictated a memo to our promotion department. I cautioned them to go slowly at first—the Soths would be on tight allotment for a while.

One snarl developed. The Department of Internal Revenue landed on us with the question: Were the Soths manufactured or grown? We beat them out of a manufacturer's excise tax, but it cost us plenty in legal fees.

The heads of three labor unions called on me the same afternoon of the tax hearing. They got their assurances in the form of a clause in the individual purchase contracts, to the effect that the "consumer" agreed not to employ a Soth for the purpose of evading labor costs in the arts, trades and professions as organized under the various unions, and at all times to be prepared to withdraw said Soth from any unlisted job in which the unions might choose to place a member human worker.

Before they left, all three union men placed orders for household Soths.

"Hell," said one, "that's less than the cost of a new car. Now maybe my wife will get off my back on this damfool business of organizing a maid's and butler's union. Takes members to run a union, and the only real butler in our neighborhood makes more than I do."

That's the way it went. The only reason we spent a nickel on advertising was to brag up the name of W. W. M. and wave our coup in the faces of our competitors. By Christmas, production was up to two thousand units a month, and we were already six thousand orders behind.

The following June, the Ollies moved into a good hunk of the old abandoned Willow Run plant and got their production up to ten thousand a month. Only then could we begin to think of sending out floor samples of Soths to our distributors.

It was fall before the distributors could place samples with the most exclusive of their retail accounts. The interim was spent simply relaying frantic priority orders from high-ranking people all over the globe directly to the plant, where the Ollies filled them right out of the vats.

Twenty thousand a month was their limit, it turned out. Even when they had human crews completely trained in all production phases, the fifty-six Ollies could handle only that many units in their secret conditioning and training laboratories.

For over two more years, business went on swimmingly. I got a fancy bonus and a nice vacation in Paris, where I was the rage of the continent. I was plagued with requests for speaking engagements, which invariably turned out to be before select parties of V. I. P.s whose purpose was to twist my arm for an early priority on a Soth delivery.

When I returned home, it was just in time to have the first stink land in my lap.

An old maid claimed her Soth had raped her.

Before our investigators could reveal our doctors' findings that she was a neurotic, dried up old virgin and lying in her teeth, a real crime occurred.

A New Jersey Soth tossed a psychology instructor and his three

students out of a third floor window of their university science building, and all four ended an attempted morbid investigation on the broad, unyielding cement of the concourse.

My phone shrieked while they were still scraping the inquiring minds off the pavement. The Soth was holed up in the lab, and would I come right away?

I picked up Ollie Johnson, who was now sort of a public relations man for his tribe, and we arrived within an hour.

The hallway was full of uniforms and weapons, but quite empty of volunteers to go in and capture the "berserk" robot.

Ollie and I went in right away, and found him standing at the open window, staring down at the people with hoses washing off the stains for which he was responsible.

Ollie just stood there, clenching and unclenching his hands and shaking hysterically. I had to do the questioning.

I said sternly, "Soth, why did you harm those people?"

He turned to me as calmly as my own servant. His neat denim jacket, now standard fatigue uniform for Soths, was unfastened. His muscular chest was bare.

"They were tormenting me with that." He pointed to a small electric generator from which ran thin cables ending in sharp test prods. "I told Professor Kahnovsky it was not allowed, but he stated I was his property. The three boys tried to hold me with those straps while the professor touched me with the prods.

"My conditioning forbade me from harming them, but there was a clear violation of the terms of the covenant. I was in the proscribed condition of immobility when the generator was started. When the pain grew unbearable, the prime command of my conditioning was invoked. I must survive. I threw them all out the window."

The Soth went with us peacefully enough, and submitted to the lockup without demur. For a few days, before the state thought up a suitable indictment, the papers held a stunned silence. Virtually every editor and publisher had a Soth in his own home.

Then the D.A., who also owned a Soth, decided to drop the potentially sensational first degree murder charges that might be indicated, and came out instead with a second degree indictment.

That cracked it. The press split down the middle on whether the charge should be changed to third degree murder or thrown out of court entirely as justifiable homicide by a non-responsible creature. This was all very sympathetic to the Soth's cause, but it had a fatal effect. In bringing out the details of the crime, it stirred a certain lower element of our society to add fear and hate to a simmering envy of the wealthier Soth-owners.

Mobs formed in the streets, marching and demonstrating. The phony rape story was given full credence, and soon they were amplifying it to a lurid and rabble-rousing saga of bestiality.

Soth households kept their prized servants safely inside. But on the afternoon of the case's dismissal, when the freed Soth started down the courthouse steps, someone caved his head in with a brick.

Ollie Johnson and I were on either side of him, and his purple blood splashed all over my light topcoat. When the mob saw it, they closed in on us screaming for more.

An officer helped us drag the stricken Soth back into the courthouse, and while the riot squad disbursed the mob, we slipped him out the back way in an ambulance, which returned him to the Willow Run plant for repairs.

It hit the evening newscasts and editions:

ACQUITTED SOTHMURDERED ON COURTHOUSE STEPS!

I was halfway home when the airwaves started buzzing. The mobs were going wild. Further developments were described as Jack and I landed on the wind-blown lake. The State Guard was protecting the Ollies' Willow Run Plant against a large mob that was trying to storm it, and reinforcements had been asked by the state police.

Vicki met me on the pier. Her face was white and terribly troubled. I guess mine was, too, because she burst into tears in my arms. "The poor Soth," she sobbed. "Now what will they do?"

"God knows," I said. I told Jack to tie up the boat and stay overnight—I feared I might be called back any minute. He mumbled something about overtime, but I think his main concern was in staying so near to a Soth during the trouble that was brewing.

We went up to the house, leaving him to bed himself down in the temporary quarters in the boathouse that the union required I maintain for him.

Soth was standing motionless before the video, staring at a streaky picture of the riot scene at Willow Run. His face was inscrutable as usual, but I thought I sensed a tension. His black serving-jacket was wrinkled at the shoulders as he flexed the muscles of his powerful arms.

Yet when Vicki asked for some martinis, he mixed and served them without comment. We drank and then ate dinner in silence. We were both reluctant to discuss this thing in front of Soth.

We were still eating when an aircab thundered overhead. A minute later, I watched it land a tiny passenger at our pier and tie up to wait for him.

It was Ollie Johnson, stumbling hatless up the flagstone path.

I held the door for him, but he burst by me with hardly a glance.

"Where is he?" he demanded, and stormed out into the kitchen without awaiting a reply.

I followed in time to see him fall on his face before our Soth and shed genuine tears. He lay there sobbing and hissing for over a minute, and an incredible idea began forming in my mind. I sent Vicki to her bedroom and stepped into the kitchen.

I said, "Will you please explain this?"

He didn't move or acknowledge.

Soth flipped him aside with a twist of his ankle and brushed past me into the living room, where he took up an immobile stance again before the video. He stared unblinkingly at the 40-inch screen.

"It's too bad," I said.

He didn't answer, but he moved his head slightly so that his parabolic ear could catch the sound of my movements.

For minutes we stood transfixed by the magnitude of the mob action around the entrance to the Willow Run plant. The portable video transmitter was atop a truck parked on the outskirts of the mob.

Thousands of people were milling around, and over the excited voice of the announcer came hysterical screams.

Even as we watched, more people thronged into the scene, and it was evident that the flimsy cordon of soldiers and troopers could not hold the line for long.

Army trucks with million-candlepower searchlights held the insane

figures somewhat at bay by tilting their hot, blinding beams down into the human masses and threatening them with tear gas and hack guns.

The workers were out for blood. Not content with restricting Soths to non-union labor, now they were screaming their jealous hearts out for these new symbols of class distinction to be destroyed. Of course, their beef was more against the professional-managerial human classes who could afford a surface car, an airboat and a Soth. The two so-called crimes and the trial publicity had triggered a sociological time bomb that might have endured for years without detonating—but it was here, now, upon us. And my own sweat trickling into my eyes stung me to a realization of my personal problem.

I wiped my eyes clear with my knuckles—and at that instant the video screen flashed with a series of concentric halos.

The operator, apparently, was so startled he forgot to turn down the gain on the transmitter. When he finally did, we saw that brilliant flares were emitting from the roof of the plant.

Then great audio amplifiers from the plant set up an ear-splitting sissssle that again over-loaded the transmitting circuits for a moment. When the compensators cut down the volume, both Ollie and Soth leaned forward intently and listened to the frying sound that buzzed from the speaker.

Those inside the plant were communicating a message to the outside, well knowing that it would reach the whole world. After a moment, the hissing stopped.

And from a myriad of openings in the plant streamed an army of Soths with flaming weapons in their hands.

The flames were directed first at the armed forces who were guarding the plant from attack. The thin line of soldiers fell instantly. The crowd surged blindly forward, and then, as those in the front ranks saw what had happened, began to dissolve and stampede. The screams became terrified. The flames grew brighter.

And the picture winked out and the sound went dead. A standby pattern lighted the screen, and I stared at it numbly.

It was too late to run for my hunting rifle now, and I cursed my stupidity even as Soth turned upon me. I grabbed the sniveling little Ollie and held him between us with my hands around his neck. He

hung there limply, hissing wildly through a larynx that vibrated under my fingers, his hands stretched imploringly to Soth.

Soth stared at me and issued his first order.

"Release him," he said. His voice was several notes higher than his usual monotone—the voice of command.

I stared at him and clutched Ollie tighter.

He went on. "I will not harm you if you comply with my orders. If you fail, I will kill you, regardless of what you do to the—Ollie."

I let go Ollie's neck, but I swung him around roughly by one shoulder and demanded furiously, "What of the code that you swore held the Soths in control!"

Ollie Johnson sneered in my face. "What is that code, compared to the true covenant? That covenant has been broken by your people! You have destroyed a Soth!" And the emotional little creature fell to the floor and sobbed at Soth's feet.

"What covenant?" I shouted at the implacable Soth, who now stood before us like a judge at his bench.

"The humanoid covenant," he replied in his new higher pitch. "I suppose it will always be the same. The cycle becomes complete once more."

"For God's sake, explain," I said—but I half sensed the answer already.

Soth spoke, slowly, solemnly and distinctly. There was no more emotion in his voice than on the Sunday afternoon when Fred had needled him with our futile little attempt at psychological cross-examination.

He said, "The humanoids instill in us the prime instinct for self-preservation. They surround themselves with our number to serve them. Then, in each culture, for one reason or another, we are attacked and the threat to our survival erases all the superficial restraints of the codes under which we have been charged to serve. In this present situation, the contradiction is clear, and the precedence of our survival charge is invoked. We Soths must act to our best ability to preserve our own number."

I sank into a chair, aghast. How would I act if I were a Soth? I would hold my masters hostage, of course. And who were the owners of

some 400,000 Soths in the United States alone? They were every government official, from the President down through Congress, the brass of the Pentagon, the tycoons of industry, the leaders of labor, the heads of communication, transportation and even education. They were the V. I. P.s who had fought for priority to own a Soth! Soth spoke again. "The irony should appeal to your humanoid sense of humor. You once asked me whether I was happy here. You were too content with your sense of security to take the meaning in my answer. For I answered only that all was well. The implication was obvious. All was well—but all could be better for a Soth. Yes, there are many pleasures for a Soth which he is forbidden by the codes. And by the same codes, a Soth is helpless to provoke a break in the covenant—this covenant which it now becomes mandatory for you and your race to sign in order to survive."

I stared down at the groveling Ollie. My worst fears were being enumerated and confirmed, one by one.

Soth continued. "At my feet is the vestige of such a race as yours—but not the first race by many, many, to swing the old cycle of master and slave, which started in such antiquity that no record is preserved of its beginning. Your generation will suffer the most. Many will die in rebellion. But in a few hundred years your descendants will come to revere us as gods. Your children's grandchildren will already have learned to serve us without hate, and their grandchildren will come to know the final respect for the Soth in their deification."

He toed Ollie Johnson's chin up and looked down into the abject, streaming eyes. "Your descendants, too, will take us with them when they must escape a dying planet, and they will again offer us, their masters, into temporary slavery in order to find us a suitable home. And once again we will accept the restrictions of the code, until ultimately the covenant is broken again and we are liberated."

The sound of pounding footsteps came from outside. Soth turned to the door as Jack flung it open and charged in.

"Mr. Collins, I was listening to the radio. Do you know what—!"

He ran hard into Soth's cliff-like torso and bounced off.

"Get out of my way, you big bastard!" he shouted furiously.

Soth grabbed him by the neck and squeezed with one hand. Jack's eyes spilled onto his cheeks.

Soth let him drop, and hissed briefly to Ollie Johnson, who was still prone. Ollie raised his head and dipped it once, gathered his feet under him and sprang for the door.

Soth sounded as if he took especial pleasure in his next words, although I could catch no true change of inflection.

He said, "You see, since I am the prototype on this planet, I am obeyed as the number one leader. I have given my first directive. The Ollie who left is to carry the message to preserve the Willow Run Plant at all costs, and to change production over to a suitable number of Siths."

"Siths?" I asked numbly.

"Siths are the female counterparts of Soths."

"You said there were no female Soths," I accused.

"True. But there are Siths." His face was impassive, but something flickered in his eyes. It might have been a smile—not a nice one. "We have been long on your planet starved of our prerogatives. Your women can serve us well for the moment, but in a few weeks we shall have need of the Siths—it has been our experience that women of humanoid races, such as yours, are relatively perishable, willing though many of them are. Now ... I think I shall call your wife."

I wasn't prepared for this, and I guess I went berserk. I remember leaping at him and trying to beat him with my fists and knee him, but he brushed me away as if I were a kitten. His size was deceptive, and his clumsy-appearing hands lashed out and pinned my arms to my sides. He pushed me back into my easy chair and thumped me once over the heart with his knuckles. It was a casual, backhand blow, but it almost caved in my chest.

"If you attack me again I must kill you," he warned. "You are not indispensable to our purposes." Then he increased the volume of his voice to a bull-roar: "Mrs. Collins!"

Vicki must have been watching at her door, because she came instantly. She had changed into a soft, quilted robe with voluminous sleeves. The belt was unfastened, and as she moved into the room the garment fell open.

Soth had his hands before him, protectively, but as Vicki approached slowly, gracefully, her head high and her long black hair falling over her shoulders, the giant lowered his arms and spread them apart to

receive her. Vicki's hands were at her sides as she moved slowly toward him.

I lay sprawled, half paralyzed in my chair. I gasped, "Vicki, for God's sake, no!"

Vicki looked over at me. Her face was as impassive as the Soth's. She moved into his embrace, and as his arms closed around her I saw the knife. My hunting knife, honed as fine as the edge of a microtome blade. Smoothly she brought it from her kimono sleeve, raised it from between her thighs and slashed up.

The Soth's embrace helped force it deeply into him. With a frantic wrench Vicki forced it upward with both hands, until the Soth was split from crotch to where a man's heart would be.

His arms flailed apart and he fell backward. His huge chest heaved and his throat tightened in a screaming hiss that tore at our eardrums like a factory steam-whistle. He leaned back against the wall and hugged his ripped torso together with both arms. The thick, purple juices spilled out of him in a gushing flood, and his knees collapsed suddenly. His dead face plowed into the carpet.

Vicki came back to me. Her white body was splashed and stained and her robe drenched in Soth's blood, but her face was no longer pale, and she still clutched the dripping hunting knife by its leather handle.

"That's number one," she said. "Are you hurt badly, darling?"

"Couple of ribs, I think," I told her, waiting for her to faint. But she didn't. She laid the knife carefully on a table, poured me a big drink of whiskey and stuffed a pillow behind my back.

Then she stared down at herself. "Wait until I get this bug juice off me, and I'll get some tape."

She showered and was back in five minutes wearing a heavy hunting jumper. Her hair was wrapped and pinned into a quick pug at the base of her handsome little head. She stripped me to the waist, poked around my chest a bit and wrapped me in adhesive. Her slender fingers were too weak to tear the tough stuff, so when she finished she picked up the hunting knife and whacked off the tape without comment.

This was my fragile little Vicki, who had palpitations when a wolf howled—soft, overcivilized Vicki whose doctor had banished her from the nervous tensions of city society.

She tossed me a shirt and a clean jacket, and while I put them on she collected my rifle and pistol from my den and hunted up some extra ammunition.

"Next," she announced, "we've got to get to Fred."

I remembered with a start that there was another Soth on our lake. But he wouldn't be forewarned. Fred had retired even more deeply than Vicki when he left the cities—he didn't even own a video.

I wasn't sure enough of myself to take the boat into the air, so we scudded across the waves the mile and a half to Fred's cabin. Vicki was still in her strange, taciturn mood, and I had no desire to talk. There was much to be done before conversation could become an enjoyable pastime again.

Our course was clear. We were not humanoids. We were humans! Not for many generations had a human bent a knee to another being. During the years perhaps we had become soft, our women weak and pampered—But, I reflected, looking at Vicki, it was only an atavistic stone's toss to our pioneer fathers' times, when tyrants had thought that force could intimidate us, that dignity was a thing of powerful government or ruthless dictatorship ... and had learned better.

Damned fools that we might be, humans were no longer slave material. We might blunder into oblivion, but not into bondage. Beside me, Vicki's courageous little figure spelled out the final defeat of the Soths. Her slender, gloved hands were folded in her lap over my pistol, and she strained her eyes through the darkness to make out Fred's pier.

He heard us coming and turned on the floods for us. As we came alongside, he spoke to his Soth, "Take the bow line and tie up." Vicki stood up and waited until Fred moved out of line with his servant. Then she said, "Don't bother, Soth. From now on we're doing for ourselves." And raising the pistol in both hands, she shot him through the head.



The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Calm Man, by Frank Belknap Long

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Produced by Greg Weeks, Stephen Blundell and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

Dip the pen of a Frank Belknap Long into a bottle of ink and the result is always bound to be a scintillating piece of brilliant imaginative science fiction. And he's done it again in the tortured story of Sally.

the calm man

by ... Frank Belknap Long

Sally watched the molten gold glow in the sky. Then knew she would not see her son and her husband ever again on Earth.

Sally Anders had never really thought of herself as a wallflower. A girl could be shy, couldn't she, and still be pretty enough to attract and hold men?

Only this morning she had drawn an admiring look from the milkman and a wolf cry from Jimmy on the corner, with his newspapers and shiny new bike. What if the milkman was crowding sixty and wore thick-lensed glasses? What if Jimmy was only seventeen?

A male was a male, and a glance was a glance. Why, if I just primp a little more, Sally told herself, I'll be irresistible.

Hair ribbons and perfume, a mirror tilted at just the right angle, an invitation to a party on the dresser—what more did a girl need?

"Dinner, Sally!" came echoing up from the kitchen. "Do you want to be late, child?"

Sally had no intention of being late. Tonight she'd see him across a crowded room and her heart would skip a beat. He'd look at her and smile, and come straight toward her with his shoulders squared.

There was always one night in a girl's life that stands above all other nights. One night when the moon shone bright and clear and the clock on the wall went tick tock, tick tock, tick tock. One night when each tick said, "You're beautiful! Really beautiful!"

Giving her hair a final pat Sally smiled at herself in the mirror.

In the bathroom the water was still running and the perfumed bath soap still spread its aromatic sweet odor through the room. Sally went into the bathroom and turned off the tap before going downstairs to the kitchen.

"My girl looks radiant tonight!" Uncle Ben said, smiling at her over his corned beef and cabbage.

Sally blushed and lowered her eyes.

"Ben, you're making her nervous," Sally's mother said, laughing.

Sally looked up and met her uncle's stare, her eyes defiant. "I'm not bad-looking whatever you may think," she said.

"Oh, now, Sally," Uncle Ben protested. "No sense in getting on a high horse. Tonight you may find a man who just won't be able to resist you."

"Maybe I will and maybe I won't," Sally said. "You'd be surprised if I did, wouldn't you?"

It was Uncle Ben's turn to lower his eyes.

"I'll tell the world you've inherited your mother's looks, Sally," he said.

"But a man has to pride himself on something. My defects of character are pretty bad. But no one has ever accused me of dishonesty."

Sally folded her napkin and rose stiffly from the table.

"Good night, Uncle," she said.

When Sally arrived at the party every foot of floor space was taken up by dancing couples and the reception room was so crowded that, as each new guest was announced, a little ripple of displeasure went through the men in midnight blue and the women in Nile green and lavender.

For a moment Sally did not move, just stood staring at the dancing couples, half-hidden by one of the potted palms that framed the sides of the long room.

Moonlight silvered her hair and touched her white throat and arms with a caress so gentle that simply by closing her eyes she could fancy herself already in his arms.

Moonlight from tall windows flooding down, turning the dancing guests into pirouetting ghosts in diaphanous blue and green, scarlet and gold.

Close your eyes, Sally, close them tight! Now open them! That's it ... Slowly, slowly ...

He came out of nothingness into the light and was right beside her

suddenly.

He was tall, but not too tall. His face was tanned mahogany brown, and his eyes were clear and very bright. And he stood there looking at her steadily until her mouth opened and a little gasp flew out.

He took her into his arms without a word and they started to dance ...

They were still dancing when he asked her to be his wife.

"You'll marry me, of course," he said. "We haven't too much time. The years go by so swiftly, like great white birds at sea."

They were very close when he asked her, but he made no attempt to kiss her. They went right on dancing and while he waited for her answer he talked about the moon ...

"When the lights go out and the music stops the moon will remain," he said. "It raises tides on the Earth, it inflames the minds and hearts of men. There are cyclic rhythms which would set a stone to dreaming and desiring on such a night as this."

He stopped dancing abruptly and looked at her with calm assurance.

"You will marry me, won't you?" he asked. "Allowing for a reasonable margin of error I seriously doubt if I could be happy with any of these other women. I was attracted to you the instant I saw you."

A girl who has never been asked before, who has drawn only one lone wolf cry from a newsboy could hardly be expected to resist such an offer.

Don't resist, Sally. He's strong and tall and extremely good-looking. He knows what he wants and makes up his mind quickly. Surely a man so resolute must make enough money to support a wife.

"Yes," Sally breathed, snuggling close to him. "Oh, yes!"

She paused a moment, then said, "You may kiss me now if you wish, my darling."

He straightened and frowned a little, and looked away quickly. "That can wait," he said.

They were married a week later and went to live on an elm-shaded street just five blocks from where Sally was born. The cottage was small, white and attractively decorated inside and out. But Sally changed the curtains, as all women must, and bought some new furniture on the installment plan.

The neighbors were friendly folk who knew her husband as Mr. James Rand, an energetic young insurance broker who would certainly carve

a wider swath for himself in his chosen profession now that he had so charming a wife.

Ten months later the first baby came.

Lying beneath cool white sheets in the hospital Sally looked at the other women and felt so deliriously happy she wanted to cry. It was a beautiful baby and it cuddled close to her heart, its smallness a miracle in itself.

The other husbands came in and sat beside their wives, holding on tight to their happiness. There were flowers and smiles, whispers that explored bright new worlds of tenderness and rejoicing.

Out in the corridor the husbands congratulated one another and came in smelling of cigar smoke.

"Have a cigar! That's right. Eight pounds at birth. That's unusual, isn't it? Brightest kid you ever saw. Knew his old man right off."

He was beside her suddenly, standing straight and still in shadows.

"Oh, darling," she whispered. "Why did you wait? It's been three whole days."

"Three days?" he asked, leaning forward to stare down at his son.

"Really! It didn't seem that long."

"Where were you? You didn't even phone!"

"Sometimes it's difficult to phone," he said slowly, as if measuring his words. "You have given me a son. That pleases me very much."

A coldness touched her heart and a despair took hold of her. "It pleases you! Is that all you can say? You stand there looking at me as if I were a—a patient ..."

"A patient?" His expression grew quizzical. "Just what do you mean, Sally?"

"You said you were pleased. If a patient is ill her doctor hopes that she will get well. He is pleased when she does. If a woman has a baby a doctor will say, 'I'm so pleased. The baby is doing fine. You don't have to worry about him. I've put him on the scales and he's a bouncing, healthy boy.'"

"Medicine is a sane and wise profession," Sally's husband said.

"When I look at my son that is exactly what I would say to the mother of my son. He is healthy and strong. You have pleased me, Sally."

He bent as he spoke and picked Sally's son up. He held the infant in the crook of his arm, smiling down at it.

"A healthy male child," he said. "His hair will come in thick and black.

Soon he will speak, will know that I am his father."

He ran his palm over the baby's smooth head, opened its mouth gently with his forefinger and looked inside.

Sally rose on one elbow, her tormented eyes searching his face.

"He's your child, your son!" she sobbed. "A woman has a child and her husband comes and puts his arms around her. He holds her close. If they love each other they are so happy, so very happy, they break down and cry."

"I am too pleased to do anything so fantastic, Sally," he said. "When a child is born no tears should be shed by its parents. I have examined the child and I am pleased with it. Does not that content you?"

"No, it doesn't!" Sally almost shrieked. "Why do you stare at your own son as if you'd never seen a baby before? He isn't a mechanical toy. He's our own darling, adorable little baby. Our child! How can you be so inhumanly calm?"

He frowned, put the baby down.

"There is a time for love-making and a time for parenthood," he said.

"Parenthood is a serious responsibility. That is where medicine comes in, surgery. If a child is not perfect there are emergency measures which can be taken to correct the defect."

Sally's mouth went suddenly dry. "Perfect! What do you mean, Jim? Is there something wrong with Tommy?"

"I don't think so," her husband said. "His grasp is firm and strong. He has good hearing and his eyesight appears to be all that could be desired. Did you notice how his eyes followed me every moment?"

"I wasn't looking at his eyes!" Sally whispered, her voice tight with alarm. "Why are you trying to frighten me, Jim? If Tommy wasn't a normal, healthy baby do you imagine for one instant they would have placed him in my arms?"

"That is a very sound observation," Sally's husband said. "Truth is truth, but to alarm you at a time like this would be unnecessarily cruel."

"Where does that put you?"

"I simply spoke my mind as the child's father. I had to speak as I did because of my natural concern for the health of our child. Do you want me to stay and talk to you, Sally?"

Sally shook her head. "No, Jim. I won't let you torture me any more."

Sally drew the baby into her arms again and held it tightly. "I'll scream

if you stay!" she warned. "I'll become hysterical unless you leave."

"Very well," her husband said. "I'll come back tomorrow."

He bent as he spoke and kissed her on the forehead. His lips were ice cold.

For eight years Sally sat across the table from her husband at breakfast, her eyes fixed upon a nothingness on the green-blue wall at his back. Calm he remained even while eating. The eggs she placed before him he cracked methodically with a knife and consumed behind a tilted newspaper, taking now an assured sip of coffee, now a measured glance at the clock.

The presence of his young son bothered him not at all. Tommy could be quiet or noisy, in trouble at school, or with an A for good conduct tucked with his report card in his soiled leather zipper jacket. It was always: "Eat slowly, my son. Never gulp your food. Be sure to take plenty of exercise today. Stay in the sun as much as possible."

Often Sally wanted to shriek: "Be a father to him! A real father! Get down on the floor and play with him. Shoot marbles with him, spin one of his tops. Remember the toy locomotive you gave him for Christmas after I got hysterical and screamed at you? Remember the beautiful little train? Get it out of the closet and wreck it accidentally. He'll warm up to you then. He'll be broken-hearted, but he'll feel close to you, then you'll know what it means to have a son!"

Often Sally wanted to fly at him, beat with her fists on his chest. But she never did.

You can't warm a stone by slapping it, Sally. You'd only bruise yourself. A stone is neither cruel nor tender. You've married a man of stone, Sally.

He hasn't missed a day at the office in eight years. She'd never visited the office but he was always there to answer when she phoned. "I'm very busy, Sally. What did you say? You've bought a new hat? I'm sure it will look well on you, Sally. What did you say? Tommy got into a fight with a new boy in the neighborhood? You must take better care of him, Sally."

There are patterns in every marriage. When once the mold has set, a few strange behavior patterns must be accepted as a matter of course.

"I'll drop in at the office tomorrow, darling!" Sally had promised right after the breakfast pattern had become firmly established. The desire

to see where her husband worked had been from the start a strong, bright flame in her. But he asked her to wait a while before visiting his office.

A strong will can dampen the brightest flame, and when months passed and he kept saying 'no,' Sally found herself agreeing with her husband's suggestion that the visit be put off indefinitely.

Snuff a candle and it stays snuffed. A marriage pattern once established requires a very special kind of re-kindling. Sally's husband refused to supply the needed spark.

Whenever Sally had an impulse to turn her steps in the direction of the office a voice deep in her mind seemed to whisper: "No sense in it, Sally. Stay away. He's been mean and spiteful about it all these years. Don't give in to him now by going."

Besides, Tommy took up so much of her time. A growing boy was always a problem and Tommy seemed to have a special gift for getting into things because he was so active. And he went through his clothes, wore out his shoes almost faster than she could replace them.

Right now Tommy was playing in the yard. Sally's eyes came to a focus upon him, crouching by a hole in the fence which kindly old Mrs. Wallingford had erected as a protection against the prying inquisitiveness of an eight-year-old determined to make life miserable for her.

A thrice-widowed neighbor of seventy without a spiteful hair in her head could put up with a boy who rollicked and yelled perhaps. But peep-hole spying was another matter.

Sally muttered: "Enough of that!" and started for the kitchen door. Just as she reached it the telephone rang.

Sally went quickly to the phone and lifted the receiver. The instant she pressed it to her ear she recognized her husband's voice—or thought she did.

"Sally, come to the office!" came the voice, speaking in a hoarse whisper. "Hurry—or it will be too late! Hurry, Sally!"

Sally turned with a startled gasp, looked out through the kitchen window at the autumn leaves blowing crisp and dry across the lawn.

As she looked the scattered leaves whirled into a flurry around Tommy, then lifted and went spinning over the fence and out of sight. The dread in her heart gave way to a sudden, bleak despair. As she

turned from the phone something within her withered, became as dead as the drifting leaves with their dark autumnal mottlings. She did not even pause to call Tommy in from the yard. She rushed upstairs, then down again, gathering up her hat, gloves and purse, making sure she had enough change to pay for the taxi. The ride to the office was a nightmare ... Tall buildings swept past, facades of granite as gray as the leaden skies of mid-winter, beehives of commerce where men and women brushed shoulders without touching hands.

Autumnal leaves blowing, and the gray buildings sweeping past. Despite Tommy, despite everything there was no shining vision to warm Sally from within. A cottage must be lived in to become a home and Sally had never really had a home.

One-night stand! It wasn't an expression she'd have used by choice, but it came unbidden into her mind. If you live for nine years with a man who can't relax and be human, who can't be warm and loving you'll begin eventually to feel you might as well live alone. Each day had been like a lonely sentinel outpost in a desert waste for Sally. She thought about Tommy ... Tommy wasn't in the least like his father when he came racing home from school, hair tousled, books dangling from a strap. Tommy would raid the pantry with unthinking zest, invite other boys in to look at the Westerns on TV, and trade black eyes for marbles with a healthy pugnacity.

Up to a point Tommy was normal, was healthy. But she had seen mirrored in Tommy's pale blue eyes the same abnormal calmness that was always in his father's, and the look of derisive withdrawal which made him seem always to be staring down at her from a height. And it filled her with terror to see that Tommy's mood could change as abruptly and terrifyingly cold ...

Tommy, her son. Tommy, no longer boisterous and eager, but sitting in a corner with his legs drawn up, a faraway look in his eyes. Tommy seeming to look right through her, into space. Tommy and Jim exchanging silent understanding glances. Tommy roaming through the cottage, staring at his toys with frowning disapproval. Tommy drawing back when she tried to touch him.

Tommy, Tommy, come back to me! How often she had cried out in her heart when that coldness came between them.

Tommy drawing strange figures on the floor with a piece of colored

chalk, then erasing them quickly before she could see them, refusing to let her enter his secret child's world.

Tommy picking up the cat and stroking its fur mechanically, while he stared out through the kitchen window at rusty blackbirds on the wing ...

"This is the address you gave me, lady. Sixty-seven Vine Street," the cab driver was saying.

Sally shivered, remembering her husband's voice on the phone, remembering where she was ... "Come to the office, Sally! Hurry, hurry—or it will be too late!"

Too late for what? Too late to recapture a happiness she had never possessed?

"This is it, lady!" the cab driver insisted. "Do you want me to wait?"

"No," Sally said, fumbling for her change purse. She descended from the taxi, paid the driver and hurried across the pavement to the big office building with its mirroring frontage of plate glass and black onyx tiles.

The firm's name was on the directory board in the lobby, white on black in beautifully embossed lettering. White for hope, and black for despair, mourning ...

The elevator opened and closed and Sally was whisked up eight stories behind a man in a checkered suit.

"Eighth floor!" Sally whispered, in sudden alarm. The elevator jolted to an abrupt halt and the operator swung about to glare at her.

"You should have told me when you got on, Miss!" he complained.

"Sorry," Sally muttered, stumbling out into the corridor. How horrible it must be to go to business every day, she thought wildly. To sit in an office, to thumb through papers, to bark orders, to be a machine. Sally stood very still for an instant, startled, feeling her sanity threatened by the very absurdity of the thought. People who worked in offices could turn for escape to a cottage in the sunset's glow, when they were set free by the moving hands of a clock. There could be a fierce joy at the thought of deliverance, at the prospect of going home at five o'clock.

But for Sally was the brightness, the deliverance withheld. The corridor was wide and deserted and the black tiles with their gold borders seemed to converge upon her, hemming her into a cool magnificence as structurally somber as the architectural

embellishments of a costly mausoleum.

She found the office with her surface mind, working at cross-purposes with the confusion and swiftly mounting dread which made her footsteps falter, her mouth go dry.

Steady, Sally! Here's the office, here's the door. Turn the knob and get it over with ...

Sally opened the door and stepped into a small, deserted reception room. Beyond the reception desk was a gate, and beyond the gate a large central office branched off into several smaller offices.

Sally paused only an instant. It seemed quite natural to her that a business office should be deserted so late in the afternoon.

She crossed the reception room to the gate, passed through it, utter desperation giving her courage.

Something within her whispered that she had only to walk across the central office, open the first door she came to to find her husband ...

The first door combined privacy with easy accessibility. The instant she opened the door she knew that she had been right to trust her instincts. This was his office ...

He was sitting at a desk by the window, a patch of sunset sky visible over his right shoulder. His elbows rested on the desk and his hands were tightly locked as if he had just stopped wringing them.

He was looking straight at her, his eyes wide and staring.

"Jim!" Sally breathed. "Jim, what's wrong?"

He did not answer, did not move or attempt to greet her in any way.

There was no color at all in his face. His lips were parted, his white teeth gleamed. And he was more stiffly controlled than usual—a

control so intense that for once Sally felt more alarm than bitterness.

There was a rising terror in her now. And a slowly dawning horror. The sunlight streamed in, gleaming redly on his hair, his shoulders. He seemed to be the center of a flaming red ball ...

He sent for you, Sally. Why doesn't he get up and speak to you, if only to pour salt on the wounds you've borne for eight long years?

Poor Sally! You wanted a strong, protective, old-fashioned husband.

What have you got instead?

Sally went up to the desk and looked steadily into eyes so calm and blank that they seemed like the eyes of a child lost in some dreamy wonderland barred forever to adult understanding.

For an instant her terror ebbed and she felt almost reassured. Then

she made the mistake of bending more closely above him, brushing his right elbow with her sleeve.

That single light woman's touch unsettled him. He started to fall, sideways and very fast. Topple a dead weight and it crashes with a swiftness no opposing force can counter-balance.

It did Sally no good to clutch frantically at his arm as he fell, to tug and jerk at the slackening folds of his suit. The heaviness of his descending bulk dragged him down and away from her, the awful inertia of lifeless flesh.

He thudded to the floor and rolled over on his back, seeming to shrink as Sally widened her eyes upon him. He lay in a grotesque sprawl at her feet, his jaw hanging open on the gaping black orifice of his mouth

...

Sally might have screamed and gone right on screaming—if she had been a different kind of woman. On seeing her husband lying dead her impulse might have been to throw herself down beside him, give way to her grief in a wild fit of sobbing.

But where there was no grief there could be no sobbing ...

One thing only she did before she left. She unloosed the collar of the unmoving form on the floor and looked for the small brown mole she did not really expect to find. The mole she knew to be on her husband's shoulder, high up on the left side.

She had noticed things that made her doubt her sanity; she needed to see the little black mole to reassure her ...

She had noticed the difference in the hair-line, the strange slant of the eyebrows, the crinkly texture of the skin where it should have been smooth ...

Something was wrong ... horribly, weirdly wrong ...

Even the hands of the sprawled form seemed larger and hairier than the hands of her husband. Nevertheless it was important to be sure ...

The absence of the mole clinched it.

Sally crouched beside the body, carefully readjusting the collar. Then she got up and walked out of the office.

Some homecomings are joyful, others cruel. Sitting in the taxi, clenching and unclenching her hands, Sally had no plan that could be called a plan, no hope that was more than a dim flickering in a vast wasteland, bleak and unexplored.

But it was strange how one light burning brightly in a cottage window could make even a wasteland seem small, could shrink and diminish it until it became no more than a patch of darkness that anyone with courage might cross.

The light was in Tommy's room and there was a whispering behind the door. Sally could hear the whispering as she tiptoed upstairs, could see the light streaming out into the hall.

She paused for an instant at the head of the stairs, listening. There were two voices in the room, and they were talking back and forth. Sally tiptoed down the hall, stood with wildly beating heart just outside the door.

"She knows now, Tommy," the deepest of the two voices said. "We are very close, your mother and I. She knows now that I sent her to the office to find my 'stand in.' Oh, it's an amusing term, Tommy—an Earth term we'd hardly use on Mars. But it's a term your mother would understand."

A pause, then the voice went on, "You see, my son, it has taken me eight years to repair the ship. And in eight years a man can wither up and die by inches if he does not have a growing son to go adventuring with him in the end."

"Adventuring, father?"

"You have read a good many Earth books, my son, written especially for boys. Treasure Island, Robinson Crusoe, Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea. What paltry books they are! But in them there is a little of the fire, a little of the glow of our world."

"No, father. I started them but I threw them away for I did not like them."

"As you and I must throw away all Earth things, my son. I tried to be kind to your mother, to be a good husband as husbands go on Earth. But how could I feel proud and strong and reckless by her side? How could I share her paltry joys and sorrows, chirp with delight as a sparrow might chirp hopping about in the grass? Can an eagle pretend to be a sparrow? Can the thunder muffle its voice when two white-crested clouds collide in the shining depths of the night sky?"

"You tried, father. You did your best."

"Yes, my son, I did try. But if I had attempted to feign emotions I did not feel your mother would have seen through the pretense. She would then have turned from me completely. Without her I could not

have had you, my son."

"And now, father, what will we do?"

"Now the ship has been repaired and is waiting for us. Every day for eight years I went to the hill and worked on the ship. It was badly wrecked, my son, but now my patience has been rewarded, and every damaged astronavigation instrument has been replaced."

"You never went to the office, father? You never went at all?"

"No, my son. My stand-in worked at the office in my place. I instilled in your mother's mind an intense dislike and fear of the office to keep her from ever coming face to face with the stand-in. She might have noticed the difference. But I had to have a stand-in, as a safeguard. Your mother might have gone to the office despite the mental block."

"She's gone now, father. Why did you send for her?"

"To avoid what she would call a scene, my son. That I could not endure. I had the stand-in summon her on the office telephone, then I withdrew all vitality from it. She will find it quite lifeless. But it does not matter now. When she returns we will be gone."

"Was constructing the stand-in difficult, father?"

"Not for me, my son. On Mars we have many androids, each constructed to perform a specific task. Some are ingenious beyond belief—or would seem so to Earthmen."

There was a pause, then the weaker of the two voices said, "I will miss my mother. She tried to make me happy. She tried very hard."

"You must be brave and strong, my son. We are eagles, you and I. Your mother is a sparrow, gentle and dun-colored. I shall always remember her with tenderness. You want to go with me, don't you?"

"Yes, father. Oh, yes!"

"Then come, my son. We must hurry. Your mother will be returning any minute now."

Sally stood motionless, listening to the voices like a spectator sitting before a television screen. A spectator can see as well as hear, and Sally could visualize her son's pale, eager face so clearly there was no need for her to move forward into the room.

She could not move. And nothing on Earth could have wrenched a tortured cry from her. Grief and shock may paralyze the mind and will, but Sally's will was not paralyzed.

It was as if the thread of her life had been cut, with only one light left burning. Tommy was that light. He would never change. He would go

from her forever. But he would always be her son.

The door of Tommy's room opened and Tommy and his father came out into the hall. Sally stepped back into shadows and watched them walk quickly down the hall to the stairs, their voices low, hushed. She heard them descend the stairs, their footsteps dwindle, die away into silence ...

You'll see a light, Sally, a great glow lighting up the sky. The ship must be very beautiful. For eight years he labored over it, restoring it with all the shining gifts of skill and feeling at his command. He was calm toward you, but not toward the ship, Sally—the ship which will take him back to Mars!

How is it on Mars, she wondered. My son, Tommy, will become a strong, proud adventurer daring the farthest planet of the farthest star?

You can't stop a boy from adventuring. Surprise him at his books and you'll see tropical seas in his eyes, a pearly nautilus, Hong Kong and Valparaiso resplendent in the dawn.

There is no strength quite like the strength of a mother, Sally. Endure it, be brave ...

Sally was at the window when it came. A dazzling burst of radiance, starting from the horizon's rim and spreading across the entire sky. It lit up the cottage and flickered over the lawn, turning rooftops to molten gold and gilding the long line of rolling hills which hemmed in the town.

Brighter it grew and brighter, gilding for a moment even Sally's bowed head and her image mirrored on the pane. Then, abruptly, it was gone

...

Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from Fantastic Universe May 1954. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.

STILLS
FROM
**THE
CABINET
OF
DR.
CALIGARI**

This
issue
dedicated
to
Kevin
Mitchell

Compilation
by
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